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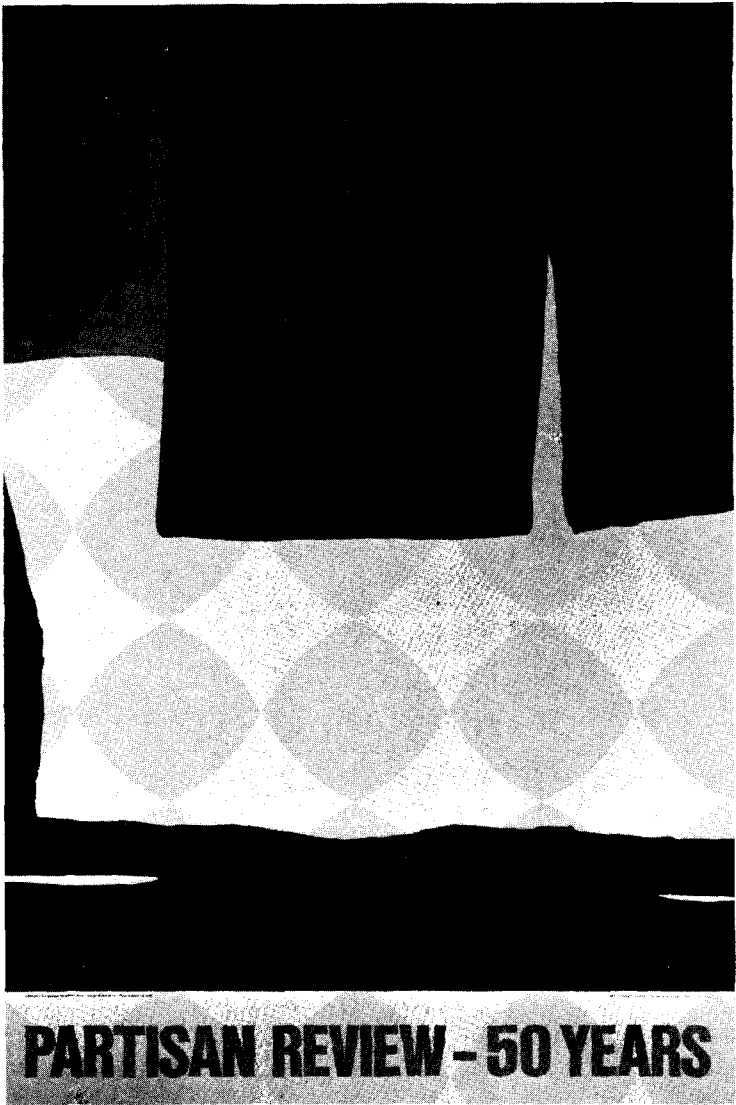
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This issue of *Partisan Review* was partially funded by support from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities.

COMMENT

STALINISM OF THE RIGHT. According to a recent piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, the *New Republic* has been moving right, and this was seen as part of a trend among magazines of opinion. *Partisan Review* as well has been accused of becoming more conservative.

I won't presume to speak for the *New Republic*, but I have found its political views mixed, which would indicate an open and flexible editorial policy. For example, the *New Republic* supported Mondale, defended Israel, and came out against "Star Wars." As for *Partisan Review*, for which I can speak—I hope with some objectivity—I think the characterization depends on outworn usage of the terms left and right, and is quite misleading. To compound the confusion, *Partisan Review* also has been attacked for being too radical, and in one instance I have been denounced (by Joseph Epstein) for not being sufficiently patriotic. Unfortunately, there is a long tradition—into which such charges fit—of political polemics that is not much concerned with questions of truth or accuracy.

The sin of moving right is, of course, an invention of the left, and often has nothing to do with the classic meaning of either right or left. These days it is usually applied to anticommunists, to supporters of Israel, to those who believe the Russians and the Cubans are trying to spread themselves in Central America, and, generally, to those who think the United States must be sufficiently armed to resist Soviet military might. In short, the charge includes those who are not taken in by anti-American, pacifist, or neutralist ideology. Nor do those who accuse us of moving to the right take account of our continued criticism of reactionary ideas and policies. It is true that in the last few years our political emphases have shifted, but that is because the political situation has changed. In the last decade the ideology of pacifism and neutralism has reached staggering proportions, in a way somewhat reminiscent of the thirties when fellow travelers and liberals were taken in by pro-Soviet propaganda, and the media and the universities were literally swamped with illusions and lies about the promise of communism. There is, however, this difference today: few illusions remain about the nature of the Soviet Union; nevertheless most left intellectuals, the left and liberal professors in the universities, and a number of media pundits, have been receptive to ideas that question the need to resist Russian aggressions and machinations. Even a part of the Democratic Party and Congress, itself, have been affected by the incessant propaganda

against the pursuit of European and American interests. This corrosive movement has reached a peak in the growth of the Greens and in the campaign against armament in Germany and in the unilateralism of the Labor Party in England. And it seems to be growing in this country.

In this situation, *Partisan Review* and other publications have felt that this new ideological tide should be combated, just as the fellow-traveling of the thirties had to be countered by those intellectuals who did not jump on bandwagons. But this does not mean now, any more than it did then, that we must abandon our criticism of the inequities of democratic Western society and of those who in the name of anticommunism support the most reactionary ideas.

This attempt at a political balance is one of the reasons why a few of the current conservatives persist in lumping us with the mindless left. Some of their diatribes against us have had nothing to do with political or intellectual differences—which might have led to a fruitful discussion. On the contrary, they have consisted of personal attacks, factual distortions, and a kind of meaningless political (and self) righteousness that can be described only as the Stalinism of the right.

This is not meant as an indictment of all neoconservatives. The writings of such conservatives as William F. Buckley, Jr., Irving Kristol, Nathan Glazer, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Peter Berger, William Barrett, Norman Podhoretz, H. J. Kaplan, and Lionel Abel have been remarkably free of personal calumny to sustain their arguments. One could agree or disagree with them without being dragged down into the kind of morass I have been describing as the Stalinism of the right.

However, it must be noted that one neoconservative, Joseph Epstein, does stand out as a practitioner of loaded polemics. Indeed, there would be no point in discussing him, if he had not distinguished himself as a critic whose putdown of those who do not meet his conservative standards reminds us—if his politics were reversed—of Stalinist methods of argument. Nor should Epstein's new conservative conformism be surprising, for he is a fairly recent convert, and converts are notoriously more regal than the king, purer than the Pope. As late as 1973, Epstein wrote a stinging piece in *Dissent*, entitled "The New Conservatives: Intellectuals in Retreat." In this piece, he lashed out at Hook, Podhoretz, Glazer, Kristol, Buckley, James Q. Wilson, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan—and of course *Commentary Magazine*, the publication that featured these intellectuals

in retreat. One of his main charges against the neoconservatives was that they were too complacent about existing society and about the social abuses of the government in power in this country. Now, there is nothing wrong with changing one's opinions; sometimes it can even be a change for the better. But the smugness and the piety with which Epstein held his former radical views and now dispenses his new conservative ones suggest not so much a process of intellectual evolution as a shift from one orthodoxy to another.

As the watchdog of the party line, Epstein also praises and castigates writers according to their political views, much as the Stalinists have been doing since the days of social realism and proletarian literature in order to separate those who were for the communists from those against them. Thus Epstein saves the American republic by panning Norman Mailer, Philip Roth, John Updike, Bernard Malamud, Renata Adler, Joan Didion, and Gabriel García Márquez, among others, for not having the right political line. On the other hand, he resurrects James Gould Cozzens, and extols the later John Dos Passos and the reformed Van Wyck Brooks, for their sound conservative visions of America. On Cynthia Ozick, he blows hot and cold, presumably because she is a conservative who sometimes strays into seemingly more liberal pastures, and does not act, either in her writing or her other activities, like a party member. Epstein also has lamented what he considers to be the lack of good contemporary literary critics. Since there are obviously a number of good critics—Iring Howe, Alfred Kazin, Lionel Abel, Denis Donoghue, John Hollander, Robert Alter, Susan Sontag, Diana Trilling, Steven Marcus, Frank Kermode, Elizabeth Hardwick, Mary McCarthy, to mention just a few older critics (there are some good younger ones, too)—Epstein must mean that there is a shortage of *conservative* critics, and that those who do not conform politically are inferior. As we know, the relation of politics to literature is not simple and is often mysterious, but Epstein simplifies the relation and takes the mystery out of it.

So much for the guardian of the faith. Sidney Hook also has recently been putting down the writers associated with *Partisan Review*, apparently out of political motives, too, although there seem to be personal ones. But Hook is a cut above Epstein. Indeed, it is sad to see someone of Hook's abilities and early achievements—particularly in perceiving in the thirties the true nature of communism—end up descending to a crotchety and self-serving dismissal of almost an entire intellectual generation.

One of the chapters of Hook's autobiography is ostensibly an account of the early days of *Partisan Review*, with a few strictures about its more recent history. But it is less an account than an attempt to erase its history and to downplay its influence. (Once before, in a letter to *The New York Times*, Hook objected to the importance given to the magazine by Nathan Glazer.) Hook's memoir is mainly an elegy to himself and a putdown of most of the people associated with the magazine. It is largely a patchwork of misinformation and distortion, interspersed with some casuistry, though it does dispense a few backhanded compliments to me. In fact, it sounds as though it were written by someone else, by a ghostwriter with just enough familiarity with the facts to twist them, and with not enough literary or political sensibility.

It is perhaps idle to speculate about Hook's motives. Could they be political as well as personal? At present, Hook is a fellow-traveling neoconservative, though he also claims to be a socialist—a closet socialist? But this would not be enough to explain his hostility. Since there are so many issues on which we agree with the more sensible neoconservatives, surely Hook could have found more suitable targets among the liberal-left writers and publications. Nor, I assume, could he be critical of us for abandoning the cause of socialism. Could there be deeper personal grievances? Hook claims to have been the political brain behind the early politics of the magazine, and he may feel that his political influence has not been recognized sufficiently. He says, for example, that we were scared to confront the Stalinists explicitly and directly. But this is not true: the first editorial in the new *Partisan Review* stressed our repudiation of Stalinist culture and politics. Hook also says we were taken in by the Moscow trials until he showed us the light. This also is not so. The truth is that Hook did have some input into the magazine, but not as much as he would now like us to believe. He did know a good deal about Marxism, but so did we, and we scarcely needed any instruction about the nature of Stalinism, for we had more direct experience of it than Hook. Hook indicates, too, that I mediated between him and the magazine. This is correct, but it does not reveal the extent to which the others associated with the magazine disparaged Hook's monolithic anticommunism and his limited philosophical horizons—or that at times Hook was invited to write for the magazine largely because of my insistence.

Some of the silliest things in Hook's recollections are his chiding Rahv and me for not being genuine revolutionists, a strange criterion

for an anti-Stalinist intellectual—who among us was?—and his far-fetched criticism of us for not paying enough attention to domestic affairs. I assume he means that we left such things as welfare, social security, taxation, etc., to the journalists and the weeklies. Hook also disingenuously spends a good deal of time praising Macdonald, who, indeed, had many virtues. But Hook used to sneer at him as a political thinker, and one can't help feeling that his newly-acquired admiration for Macdonald is a ploy to downgrade the rest of us.

There are other inaccurate statements, whose purpose obviously is to make us look bad. For example, Hook says we maneuvered Macdonald off the magazine. In fact, the reverse is true; Macdonald wanted to take over the magazine, and he proposed that whoever could put out the next issue would inherit it. I guess he assumed that he would, since he had some money and we had none. But we did find someone to finance the magazine. Another strange "recollection" is Hook's statement that he overheard Mary McCarthy telling Rahv on a public telephone that she was leaving him for Edmund Wilson. This would have been a miraculous coincidence—except for the fact that it is well known that Mary McCarthy left a note for Rahv about her change of domestic plans.

What is the point of dragging real and invented quarrels out of the past? In a period already sufficiently confused about the major issues of our time, Hook's and Epstein's nasty innuendos not only add to the confusion but introduce an atmosphere of unsavory polemics. At the very least, they make any fruitful intellectual exchange impossible.

It is, indeed, surprising that the neoconservatives should allow themselves to be represented by someone as small-minded as Joseph Epstein. (Incidentally, it is something of a scandal that Epstein should be using *The American Scholar*, the organ of Phi Beta Kappa, of which he is the editor, for his factional politics.) After all, many of the conservatives do argue persuasively. Certainly their analysis of Soviet intentions and of American foreign policy is more sophisticated than most left opinion. In any event, the issues are arguable. Yet a party liner like Epstein uses Stalinist tactics not to refute ideas but to destroy the people who hold them. Fortunately, he is not very effective. To be effective would require state power. God forbid.

W.P.

FICTION

Sergei Dovlatov

THE PERFORMANCE

There were three of us sitting in the Command Patrol Station. Security Officer Bortashevich was shuffling creased, worn cards. Gusev, on watch, was trying to get some sleep without taking a lighted cigarette out of his mouth. I was waiting for the kettle to boil and the dry bread propped against it to warm.

Bortashevich drawled limply, "Take broads, as an example. Say you and her are getting on good: movies, sugar wafers, polite conversations. . . . You quote her Gogol with Belinsky. . . . Go hear some bloody opera. . . . Then, naturally, it's into the bunk. But *madame* tells you: marry me, you bastard. First the register office, then the baser instincts. The instincts, you see, don't suit her. But if they're holy to me, then what?"

"So again, it's those kikes," Gusev said.

"What do you mean, kikes?" Bortashevich said.

"They're everywhere," I said, "from Raikin to Karl Marx. Take the venereal disease clinic at Chebyu. The doctors are Jewish, the patients are Russian. Is that the Communist way?"

Just then the telephone from the main office rang. Bortashevich put the receiver to his ear, then said to me, "For you."

I heard Captain Tokar's voice. "Come over and see me, and right away."

"Comrade Captain," I said, "it's already nine o'clock, by the way."

"Oh?" the captain said. "You only serve your country till six?"

"Then why bother posting work schedules? I'm supposed to report out tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow morning you will be in Ropcha. There's an assignment from Chief of Staff—to bring one prisoner from the Ropcha Transit Camp. To make it short, I'm waiting."

"Where are you off to?" Bortashevich asked me.

Editor's Note: This story will appear in *The Zone* by Sergei Dovlatov, translated from the Russian by Anne Frydman, to be published by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., this fall.

"Someone has to escort a zek here from Ropcha."

"For retrial?"

"Don't know."

"By regulation there should be two of you."

"What in the guard section is ever done by regulation? By regulation all they do is lock you up in the guardhouse."

Gusev raised his eyebrows. "And did you ever see a Jew locked up in the guardhouse?"

"You've got Jews on the brain," Bortashevich said. "We're tired of it. You take a good look at Russians. One look and you turn to stone."

"I don't argue," Gusev replied.

The teakettle suddenly came to a boil. I moved it onto a roofing tile next to the strongbox. "All right, I'm off."

Bortashevich pulled out a card, looked at it, and said, "Oho! The queen of spades awaits you. I envy you." Then he added, "Take handcuffs."

I took a pair.

I walked through the zone, even though I could have gone around it on the patrol footpath. It's a year now that I've been intentionally going through the zone at night. I keep hoping I'll get used to the feeling of terror. The problem of personal courage is posed to us here in a rather severe way. The champions in this category are generally acknowledged to be the Lithuanians and Tatars.

I slowed down a little near the tool shop. At night this was where the *chifir* drinkers gathered. They would fill a soldier's mug with water and empty a whole packet of loose tea into it. Then they would lower a razor blade attached to a long steel wire into the cup. The end of the wire was then thrown onto a high-voltage wire. The liquid in the cup boiled within two seconds. The brown beverage had an effect somewhat like alcohol. People began to gesticulate excitedly, to shout and laugh for no reason.

The *chifir* drinkers didn't inspire serious alarm in anyone. Serious alarm was inspired by people who could cut your throat without drinking *chifir*.

Shadows moved in the darkness. I came closer. Prisoners were sitting on potato cartons, around a small tub of *chifir*. Once they saw me, they went quiet.

"Have a seat, boss," a voice said from the darkness. "The samovar's ready."

"Sitting it out," I said, "is your department."

"He's literate," the same voice commented.

"He'll go far," a second said.

"No farther than checkpoint," a third said wryly.

Everything normal, I thought. The usual blend of friendliness and hate. Though to think of all the stuff I'd brought for them, the tea, margarine, cans of fish . . .

I lit a cigarette, rounded the sixth barrack, and came out by the camp transport depot. The rosy window of the administration office swam out of the darkness.

I knocked. An orderly let me in. In his hand was an apple.

Tokar glanced out of his office and said, "Chewing on post again, Barkovets?"

"Nothing of the kind, Comrade Captain," the orderly protested, turning away.

"Do you think I can't see? Your ears are moving. A day before yesterday you fell asleep entirely."

"I wasn't sleeping, Comrade Captain. I was thinking. But it won't happen again."

"Too bad," Tokar said, and then said to me, "Come in."

I entered, reported for duty according to regulation.

"Excellent," the captain said, tightening his belt. "Here are the documents, you can depart at once. Convey here a zek by the name of Gurin. He's serving eleven years. Fifth conviction. Follows the Thieves' Law. Be careful."

"Just who," I asked, "needs him in such a hurry? Don't we have enough of our own recidivists here?"

"There are enough," Tokar agreed.

"So what's this all about?"

"I don't know. The orders are from top command."

I unfolded the travel sheet. Under the heading marked "purpose" was this order: "To convey to the Sixth Subdivision Gurin Fyodor Emelyanovich in the capacity of performer of the role of Lenin." I asked, "What does this mean?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. Better ask the Political Instructor. Most likely they're staging a theatrical production for the sixtieth anniversary of Soviet power. So they're inviting a guest actor. Maybe he's got talent, or the appropriate mug. . . . I don't know. Meanwhile, deliver him here, and then we'll find out what it's all about. In case of anything, use your weapon. Safe journey."

I took the papers, saluted, and withdrew.

We neared Ropcha close to midnight. The settlement seemed dead. The darkness muffled the sound of dogs barking.

The logging-truck driver who had given me a ride asked, "Where are they sending you in the middle of the night? You could have gone in the morning."

I had to explain, "This way I'll be returning in daylight. Otherwise I'd be coming back at night. What's more, in the company of a dangerous recidivist."

"Could be worse," the driver said. "We've got dispatchers in logging who are more terrible than the zeks."

"It happens," I said. We said goodbye.

I woke the orderly in the checkpoint cabin, showed him my papers. Asked where I could spend the night. The orderly thought about it.

"It's noisy in the barracks. The convoy brigades get back in the middle of the night. If you took someone's bunk, they might use their belt on you. And in the kennels the dogs bark."

"Dogs — that's already better."

"You can stay here with me. All the comforts. You can cover yourself with a sheepskin jacket. The next shift comes in at seven."

I lay down, put a tin can near the trestle bed, and lit a cigarette.

The main thing is not to think about home. To concentrate on some urgent daily problem. Here, for instance: I'm running out of cigarettes. And the orderly, it seems, doesn't smoke.

I asked, "You don't smoke, or what?"

"If you offer me one, I'll smoke."

Still no better.

The orderly tried to start a conversation with me. "Is it true that your soldiers in the Sixth do it with she-goats?"

"I don't know. Doubtful. . . . The zeks, now, they might indulge."

"In my opinion, it's already better in a fist."

"Matter of taste."

"Well, all right," the orderly said, taking pity on me, "sleep. It's quiet here."

As for quiet, he was wrong. The checkpoint cabin adjoined the penal isolator. In the middle of the night, a zek woke up inside it. He

jangled his handcuffs and sang loudly: "And I go, walking about Moscow. . . ."

"Tomcat's in the mood for Pussy," the orderly grumbled. He looked into the peephole and yelled, "Agayev, shut your trap and go to sleep! Otherwise you get a fist in the eye!"

In answer, we heard, "Chief, the horns you're wearing are getting awfully long!"

The orderly responded with a torrent of ornate obscenity.

"Suck me till you're good and stuffed!" the zek yelled.

This concert lasted about two hours. On top of everything, I ran out of cigarettes.

I went up to the peephole and asked, "You wouldn't happen to have any cigarettes or *makhorka*?"

"Who are you?" Agayev asked, startled.

"I'm on assignment from the Sixth Camp Subdivision."

"And I thought you were a student. Is everyone so polite in the Sixth?"

"Yes," I said, "when they're out of cigarettes."

"There's a ton of *makhorka* here. I'll push it under the door. You wouldn't happen to be from Leningrad?"

"From Leningrad."

"A fellow-countryman. I thought so."

The rest of the night was passed in conversation.

In the morning I went looking for Dolbenko, the officer in charge of operations. Presented my orders to him. He said, "Have breakfast and wait at the checkpoint. Do you have a weapon on you? Good."

In the mess hall, they gave me tea and rolls. They had run out of hot cereal. To make up for it, they gave me a piece of lard and an onion for the road. And an instructor I knew shook out ten cigarettes for me.

I sat in the checkpoint cabin till the convoy brigades moved out. The orderly was relieved close to eight. It was quiet in the penal isolator. The zek was sleeping off the night of talk. Finally I heard, "Prisoner Gurin with belongings!"

The latch-pins clicked in the transit corridor. A security officer entered the cabin with my ward.

"Sign out," he said. "You have a weapon?"

I unbuckled my holster.

The zek was in handcuffs.

We walked out onto the porch. The winter sun blinded me. The dawn had come up quickly. As always.

On the gently sloping hill before us, cabins stood out black. The smoke above their roofs lifted straight up.

I said to Gurin, "Well, let's go."

He was a man of medium height, well-built. Under his hat there was probably a bald spot. His soiled quilted jacket was shiny in the sun.

I decided not to wait for a ride with a log-carrier but to walk to the railroad crossing right away. If a truck or tractor going our way happened to come along, fine. If not, we could make it on foot in three hours.

I didn't know that the road had been closed off near Koina. Later I learned that two zeks had stolen a car the night before. By daylight, military police had set up roadblocks at every crossing, so Gurin and I had to walk all the way back to the zone on foot. We only stopped once, to eat. I gave Gurin bread and the lard — no great sacrifice, since the lard had frozen and the bread was in crumbs.

Silent till then, the zek kept repeating, "What a feed — pure calorie bacillas! Chief, we can enjoy ourselves from the bottom of our souls!"

The handcuffs hampered him. He asked, "If you could take off my cuffs — or are you afraid I'll run off on you?"

All right, I thought. In daylight it's not dangerous. Where's he going to run to, in the snow?

I took off the handcuffs, fastened them to my belt. Gurin immediately asked permission to go relieve himself. I said, "Go do it there."

Then he crouched behind some bushes, and I held the black Vorkuta rifle by its foresight.

About ten minutes went by. My hand even got tired. Suddenly, behind my back, a foot crunched in the snow. At that moment, a hoarse voice called out, "Let's go, Chief."

I jumped up. Before me stood Gurin, smiling. Evidently, he had hung his hat on the bush. "Don't shoot, fellow-countryman."

It would have been silly to bawl him out.

Gurin had acted straight with me. He had shown me that he didn't want to run away. Or maybe he wanted to, but didn't choose to.

We took the forest path and reached the zone without incident. On the way there, I asked, "So what kind of production will this be?"

The zek didn't understand. I explained, "In the orders it says you're the one who will play the role of Lenin."

Gurin burst out laughing. "It's an old story, Chief. Even before the war, I had the nickname 'actor.' In the sense of a man who was clever, who could, as they say, move his ears. So they wrote on my record, 'actor.' I remember, I was tied up in the Criminal Investigation Section, and the investigator wrote it down just as a joke. In the 'profession before arrest' column. As if I had a profession! From the cradle, I'm a confirmed thief. I never worked a day in my life. But the way they wrote it down, that's how it stuck—'actor.' From one paper to another. All the political instructors sign me up for amateur productions: 'after all, you're an actor, an artist. . . .' Ech, if I could only meet one of those political instructors at a kolkhoz market, I'd show him what an artist I am."

I asked, "So what are you going to do? You're supposed to play Lenin himself."

"What, read a piece of paper? Simple. I'll polish my bald spot with wax, and it's in the bag. I remember, we were robbing a bank once in Kiev, and I got dressed up as a cop—and my own pals didn't recognize me. If it has to be Lenin, then let it be Lenin. As they say, a day off work is a month of life."

We walked up to the checkpoint. I turned Gurin over to the sergeant-major. The zek waved his hand. "Be seeing you, Chief. *Merci* for the feed."

He said the last words softly, so the sergeant wouldn't hear.

Since I'd been taken off work duty, I loafed for the next twenty-four hours. I drank wine with the weapon repairmen. Won four rubles from them at cards. Wrote a letter to my parents and brother. Even planned to go see a young lady I knew in the settlement. But just then an orderly came looking for me and told me to report to Political Instructor Khuriev.

I made my way to the Lenin Room. Khuriev was sitting under an enormous map of the Ust-Vym Camp. The escape points were marked with little flags.

"Have a seat," the P.I. said. "We have something important to discuss. The October holidays are approaching. We are beginning rehearsal of a one-act play called 'Kremlin Stars.' The author," here Khuriev glanced at some papers lying in front of him, "is Chichelnitsky, Yakov Chichelnitsky. The play is ideologically mature,

recommended by the cultural section of the Department of Internal Affairs. The events take place at the beginning of the twenties. There are four characters: Lenin, Dzerzhinsky, a Chekist named Timofey, and his fiancée, Polina. The young Chekist Timofey is yielding to the bourgeois manner of thinking. A merchant's daughter, Polina, is dragging him down into the maelstrom of the petit bourgeoisie. Dzerzhinsky engages in educational work with them. He himself is incurably ill. Lenin insistently urges him to take care of his health. 'Iron Felix' refuses, which makes a strong impression on Timofey. In the end, Timofey throws off the bonds of revisionism. The merchant's daughter, Polina, shyly follows after him. In the closing scene, Lenin addresses the public." Here Khuriev again rustled his papers. "'Who is this? Whose are these happy, young faces? Whose are these cheerful, sparkling eyes? Can this really be the youth of the seventies? I envy you, messengers of the future! It was for you that we lit the first lights of the housing structures! For your sake that we rooted out the dark forces of the bourgeoisie! So then let your way be lighted, children of the future, by our Kremlin stars.' And so on. And then afterwards, everyone will sing the 'Internationale.' In one outburst, as the expression goes. What do you say to all this?"

"Nothing," I said. "What can I say? A serious play."

"You're a cultured person, educated. We decided to draw you into this undertaking."

"I have nothing to do with the theater."

"Do you think I do? But a Communist should always demonstrate his social commitment."

"I'm not a Party member."

"All the more reason to take part. Your indifference goes too far. You put yourself outside the collective. Political awareness is not for you, social activity is not for you. Don't think you're so much cleverer than everyone else."

"I don't think that."

"Good. You will help with this cultural initiative. I'm managing, casting is done and I've already given out scripts, but without an assistant it's hard. Our actors—well, you know yourself . . . Lenin is being played by a thief from the Ropcha Transit Camp. An inveterate pickpocket, high up in the Thieves' Law. It's the opinion of some here that he's actively planning to escape."

I kept quiet. How could I tell the P.I. what happened in the forest?

Khuriev continued, "In the role of Dzerzhinsky—Tsurikov, nicknamed 'Stilts,' from the Fourth Brigade. In for perverting minors. Term—six years. There is evidence he takes drugs. In the role of Timofey—Gesha, an administration flunkey, works on the sanitation brigade. A passive homosexual. In the role of Polina—Tomka Lebedyeva from the Division of Economic Administration. An incredible bitch, worse than the female zeks. In a word, the public is the same. The use of narcotics is possible. Also illicit contacts with Lebedyeva. All that skirt wants is to flap around the zeks. Do you understand me?"

"What is there to understand? Our people."

"Well then, put your hand to it. There is a rehearsal today at six. You will be assistant director. Your duties in the logging sector are temporarily excused. I will notify Captain Tokar."

"No protest," I said.

"Be there at ten minutes to six."

I wandered around the barracks till six. A few times, officers wanted to send me off somewhere to take part in security operations. I told them that I had been placed at the disposal of Senior Lieutenant Khuriev, and they left me in peace.

Close to six, I sat waiting in the Lenin Room. A moment later, Khuriev appeared with a briefcase.

"And where is our personnel?"

"They'll come," I said. "Most likely they were delayed in the mess hall."

Just then, Gesha and Tsurikov walked in. Tsurikov I knew from work in the unmarked sector. He was a sullen, emaciated zek with a revolting habit—he scratched himself. Gesha worked as an orderly in the sanitation brigade, cleaning barracks, looking after the sick. He stole pills, vitamins, and any medications with alcoholic content for those in charge. Walked with a barely noticeable dance-step. It was said that zek chieftains in the zone would not let him near the campfire.

"Six on the dot," Tsurikov said and, without bending down, scratched his knee.

Gesha was rolling some paper to smoke.

Gurin appeared, wearing only a laundry-worn undershirt under his jacket. "Hot in here," he said. "Pure Tashkent! But in

general, this isn't a zone, it's a Palace of Culture. Soldiers address you in the polite form. And the rations are quite handsome. Is it really possible there are escapes here?"

"There are escapes," Khuriev replied.

"To get in, or to get out?"

"To get out," the P.I. answered without smiling.

"And I thought, maybe they come running to this cooler from the outside. Or right from the capitalist jungles."

"You made your joke, now that's enough," Khuriev said.

Just then, Lebedyeva appeared in a cloud of cheap cosmetics, her hair in a six-month permanent. She was a civilian, but she behaved like the inmates and spoke their slang. Generally, administration office workers started resembling the zeks after a month. Even contracted engineers fell into using camp argot. Not to speak of the soldiers. . . .

"Let's get down to it," the P.I. said.

The actors took creased sheets of paper out of their pockets.

"Your roles must be learned by Wednesday." Then Khuriev raised his hand. "I will now present the basic idea. The central line of the play is the struggle between feeling and duty. Comrade Dzerzhinsky, scorning illness, gives all of himself to the Revolution. Comrade Lenin insistently recommends that he take a leave. Dzerzhinsky categorically refuses. Parallel to this, the story line of Timofey develops. Animal lust for Polina temporarily blocks him from world revolution. Polina is a typical representative of the petit bourgeois mind—"

"The black-marketeer type?" Lebedyeva asked loudly.

"Don't interrupt. Her ideal is petit bourgeois well-being. Timofey experiences a conflict between feeling and duty. The personal example of Dzerzhinsky has a strong moral effect on the youth. As a result, his sense of duty triumphs. . . . I hope everything is clear? Let's begin. So then, we see Dzerzhinsky at work. Tsurikov, sit there, stage left. . . . Enter Vladimir Ilych. In his hand he holds a suitcase. We haven't got the suitcase yet, we'll use an accordion case for now. Take it. . . . So then, enter Lenin. Begin!"

Gurin grinned and said with spirit, "How are you, Felix Edmundovich!" (He said this, burring his "r's" like Lenin, "How ag you.")

Tsurikov scratched his neck and answered gloomily, "Hello."

"More respect," Khuriev said.

"Hello," Tsurikov said a little louder.

"Do you know, Felix Edmundovich, what I have here in my hand?"

"A suitcase, Vladimir Ilych."

"And just what it's for—can you guess?"

"As you were!" the P.I. shouted. "It says here, 'Lenin, with a tinge of irony.' Where's the tinge of irony? I don't see it."

"It's coming," Gurin assured him. He stretched out the arm with the case and winked insolently at Dzerzhinsky.

"Excellent," Khuriev said. "Continue. 'And just what it's for—can you guess?'"

"And just what it's for—can you guess?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," Tsurikov said.

"Not so churlish," the P.I. said, breaking in again. "Milder. Before you is Lenin himself. The leader of the world proletariat."

"I haven't the slightest idea," Tsurikov said as sullenly as before.

"That's better. Continue."

Gurin winked again with even more familiarity. "The suitcase is for you, Felix Edmundovich. So that you, dear fellow, can go off and take a rest at once."

Without special effort, Tsurikov scratched his shoulder blade. "I can't, Vladimir Ilych—there is counterrevolution all around us. Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries, bourgeois spouts—"

"Scouts," Khuriev said. "Go on."

"Your health, Felix Edmundovich, belongs to the Revolution. The comrades and I discussed it and decided: you must take a rest. I say this to you as a member of the ruling body."

Suddenly we heard a female yowl. Lebedyeva was sobbing, her head against the tablecloth.

"What's the matter?" the P.I. asked nervously.

"I'm sorry for Felix," Tamara explained. "He's skinny as a tape-worm."

"Dystrophics happen to be hardier," Gesha said with hostility.

"Break," Khuriev announced. Then he turned to me. "Well, what do you think? I would say they've grasped the main thing."

"Och," Lebedyeva exclaimed, "it's so close to life! Like in a fairytale."

Tsurikov was giving his belly a good scratch. While he did this, his eyes clouded over.

Gesha was studying the escape map. This was considered suspicious, even though the map was displayed openly.

"Let's continue," Khuriev said. The actors put out their cigarettes. "Next come Timofey and Polina. The scene in the reception room of the Cheka. Timofey is manning the switchboard. Polina enters. Begin!"

Gesha sat on a stool and grew pensive. Polina took a few steps toward him, fanning herself with a rose-colored handkerchief. "Timosha! Yoo-hoo, Timosha!"

Timofey: "Why have you come? Or is something wrong at home?"

"I can't live without you, my grey-winged dove."

Timofey: "Go home, Polya. This is no village reading room."

Lebedyeva pressed her fists to her temples and let out an oppressive, piercing howl: "You don't love me anymore, don't fancy me. . . . You've ruined the best years of my life. . . . I'm all alone now, like a mountain ash in a meadow."

Lebedyeva had trouble suppressing her sobs. Her eyes turned red. Mascara ran down her wet cheeks. Timofey, on the other hand, behaved almost mockingly. "That's the kind of work it is," he said through his teeth.

"Why can't we run off to the ends of the earth!" Polina wailed.

"To do in General Wrangel and the White Army, is that it?" Gesha said, tensing up suddenly.

"Excellent," Khuriev said. "Lebedyeva, don't stick out your behind. Chmykhalov, don't upstage the heroine." (This was how I learned Gesha's real name, Chmykhalov.) "Let's go. Enter Dzerzhinsky. 'Ah, the younger generation!'"

Tsurikov cleared his throat and said gloomily, "Ah, the whore; the younger generation!"

"What kind of parasitical words are those?" Khuriev broke in.

"Ah, the younger generation!"

"Good health, sir, Felix Edmundovich," Gesha said, rising a little.

"You're supposed to be flustered," Khuriev said.

"I think he should stand up," Gurin gave his opinion.

Gesha jumped up, overturning the stool. Then he saluted, touching his palm to his shaved head.

"Good health, sir!" he shouted.

Dzerzhinsky reached out and squeamishly shook his hand. Homosexuals were not liked in the zone. Especially passive ones.

"More dynamic!" Khuriev urged.

Gesha started talking faster. Then even faster. He rushed on, swallowing words, "I don't know how to proceed, Felix Edmundo-

vich. My Polinka has gone completely wild. She's jealous of my service, do you understand?" (Gesha pronounced it "un-stan.") "'I'm lonesome,' she says. And I really do love her, that Polinka. She's my beloved, un-stan? She's captured my heart, un-stan?"

"Again, parasite words," Khuriev shouted. "Be more careful!"

Lebedyeva, her back to us, was freshening her lipstick.

"Break!" the P.I. announced. "That's enough for today."

"Too bad," Gesha said. "I was just starting to get inspired."

"Let's sum up." Khuriev pulled out a notepad. "Lenin more or less resembles a human being. Timofey gets a B - . Polina is better than I thought she'd be, to be honest. As for Dzerzhinsky - unconvincing. Manifestly unconvincing. Remember, Dzerzhinsky is the conscience of the Revolution. A knight without fear or blemish. But the way you do him, he looks like some kind of recidivist."

"I'll try to do better," Tsurikov assured him indifferently.

"Do you know what Stanislavsky said?" Khuriev continued. "Stanislavsky would say, 'I don't believe it!' If an actor read a line in a phony way, Stanislavsky would stop the rehearsal and say, 'I don't believe it!'"

"Like the cops," Tsurikov said.

"What?" The P.I. didn't understand.

"The cops, I said, give you the same line. 'I don't believe it, I don't believe it. . . .' They nabbed me once in Rostov, and the investigator was a real pig -"

"Don't forget yourself!" the P.I. shouted.

"Especially with the weaker sex present," Gurin said.

"I'm an officer in the Regular Army," Khuriev said, raising his voice.

"I wasn't talking about you," Gurin said. "I meant Lebedyeva."

"Ah-h," Khuriev said. Then he turned to me. "Next time, be more active. Prepare your remarks. You're a person who's cultured, educated. And now you're all dismissed. We meet again on Wednesday. What's the matter with you, Lebedyeva?"

Tamara was quivering with little sobs, wringing her handkerchief.

"What is it?" Khuriev asked.

"I'm feeling it so deeply. . . ."

"Excellent. That's what Stanislavsky called 'transformation.'"

We said goodbye and we separated. I walked with Gurin to the sixth barrack. We were going the same way.

By this time, it had grown dark. The path was lighted by yel-

low lightbulbs above the fences. In the "open-fire" corridor, German shepherds ran back and forth, rattling their chains.

Suddenly, Gurin said, "So how many people did they really do in?"

"Who?" I didn't understand.

"Those dogs, of course—Lenin with Dzerzhinsky. 'Knights without fear or radish.'"

I kept quiet. How could I know whether to trust him? And anyway, why was he being so open with me?

The zek wouldn't let it go. "Now me, for example—I'm in for theft. Stilts, we assume, stuck it where he shouldn't have. Gesha's in for something on the order of black-marketeering. As you can see, not one rubout between us. While those two flooded Russia with blood, but that's all right."

"Look," I said, "you're going too far."

"What's going too far about it? Those people were the bloodiest 'No-Termers' ever."

"Listen, let's end this conversation."

"Good enough," he said.

After that, there were three or four rehearsals. Khuriev would get worked up, mop his forehead with toilet paper, and shout, "I don't believe it! Lenin is overacting, Timofey is hysterical. Polina is wagging her behind. And Dzerzhinsky looks like a thug."

"Well, what am I supposed to look like?" Tsurikov asked sullenly. "What's there is there."

"Did you ever hear of transformation?" Khuriev asked him.

"I heard," the zek said uncertainly.

"What did you hear? Just out of curiosity, what?"

"Transformation," Gurin explained for Dzerzhinsky, "is when thieves in the Law sell out to work as stoolies. Or else, let's say there's a hundred-percent-known square, but he carries on like he's a criminal. . . ."

"Some conversation," Khuriev said angrily. "Lebedyeva, don't push out your form. Think more about the content."

"My bosoms are shaking," Lebedyeva complained, "and my legs are swollen. I always gain weight when I'm nervous. And I eat so little, cottage cheese and maybe eggs. . . ."

"Not another word about bacilla-calories," Gurin said to silence her.

"Come on," Gesha fussed, "let's try it again. I have a feeling this time I'm going to transform all the way."

I made an effort to take an active part. Not for nothing had they crossed my name off the convoy schedules. Better to rehearse than to freeze out on the taiga.

I said something or other, using expressions like *mise-en-scene*, super-task, public solitude. . . .

Tsurikov practically never joined in these discussions. Or if he did say something, it was always totally unexpected. I remember, once, we were talking about Lenin, and Tsurikov suddenly said, "It can happen that someone looks like the lowest of the low, but his prick is healthy. Type of A-one baloney."

Gurin grinned. "You think we still remember what it looks like? I mean, that baloney."

"Some conversation," the political instructor said angrily.

Rumors about our dramatic circle spread through the camp. Attitudes toward the play and the leaders of the Revolution were ambivalent. Lenin, generally, was respected. Dzerzhinsky—not very much. In the mess hall, one *kapo* made a crack to Tsurikov in passing: "So, you found yourself a nice job, Stilts! Made yourself into a Chekist."

Tsurikov's response was to hit him over the head with a ladle. The *kapo* fell down. It became very quiet. Later the morose truck drivers from logging said to Tsurikov, "At least wash the ladle. You can't dip it in the slops now."

Gesha was always being asked, "Well, what about you, Clean-up? Who do you play? Krupskaya?" To this, Gesha would answer evasively, "Well, just . . . a working lad . . . an insider."

And only Gurin walked around the camp with an air of importance. He practiced burring his Leninist "r's". "You ag following the tgue goad, Comgade Gecidivists!"

"Looks like him," the zeks would say. "Pure cinema."

Khuriev got more nervous each day. Gesha waddled, spoke his lines jerkily, and kept adjusting a nonexistent Mauser. Lebedyeva sobbed almost without interruption, even at her regular daytime job. She put on so much weight that she no longer zipped up her brown imported boots. Even Tsurikov—he too was slightly transformed. He was overcome by a hoarse, tubercular cough, from which he stopped scratching himself.

The day of the dress rehearsal arrived. They glued little beards and mustaches on Lenin and Dzerzhinsky. To this end, they released a counterfeiter named Zhuravsky from solitary, temporarily. He had a steady hand and professional, artistic taste.

At first, Gurin had wanted to grow out his beard. But the security officer said it was against regulations. Still, for a month before the performance, the actors were permitted to grow out their hair. Gurin remained with his historically authentic bald head. Gesha turned out to be a redhead. And Tsurikov sprouted an entirely appropriate skewbald crew cut.

For costumes they dressed Lenin in a tight civilian suit, which corresponded to real life. For Gesha, they borrowed a leather jacket from Lieutenant Rodichev. Lebedyeva shortened a velvet party dress. Tsurikov was allotted a khaki tunic.

And so the seventh of November finally came around. Four red flags hung on the fences from early morning. The fifth was fastened to the building of the penal isolator. The sounds of the "Varshav-yanka" carried from all the metal loudspeakers.

The only ones who worked that day were the orderlies from the housekeeping services. The logging sector was closed. The production brigades all stayed in the zone.

Prisoners roamed aimlessly about the open yard. By one in the afternoon, some began to appear drunk. It was more or less the same in the barracks. Many had gone for liquor early in the morning. The rest wandered about the area in unbuttoned fatigue shirts.

The rifle park was guarded by six trusted re-enlistees. A sergeant stood guard outside the provisions storeroom. On the announcement board, a memo had been posted, entitled, "On the intensification of military watchfulness on the occasion of the Jubilee."

Toward three o'clock, they assembled the prisoners on the square by Barrack Six. The head of the camp, Major Amosov, gave a short speech. He said, "Revolutionary holidays touch every Soviet citizen. Even those who temporarily stumbled . . . killed someone, stole, raped, in general, made some kind of stir. . . . The Party gives to these people the possibility to reform, leads them through unrelenting physical labor toward socialism. In short, all hail the jubilee of our Soviet government. But as for drunkards and smokers, we will, as they say, call them to account . . . not to mention sodomists. As it is, half the she-goats in the area have been messed with, you no-good—"

"That's a funny one," a voice called out from the rows of men.

"What's the big deal? I laid the daughter of Second Regional Party Secretary Zaporozhe, but you tell me it's hands off a she-goat?"

"Quiet, Gurin," the head of the camp said. "Again you're showing off! We entrust him to play Comrade Lenin, and all he can think about is a she-goat. . . . What kind of people are you?"

"People, like people," one of the prisoners shouted from the columns. "Thugs and 'No-Termers.'"

"You're a hardened lot, as I see it," the major said.

Political Instructor Khuriev popped up behind his shoulder. "Just a second, you're not dismissed yet. At six-thirty there will be a general assembly. After the ceremonial, there will be a concert. Attendance is required. Those absent will be sent to the isolator. Are there any questions?"

"A ton of questions," a voice said out of the rows. "Want to hear? Where's all the cleaning soap gone to? Where are the warm leg-wrappings that were promised? Why is this the third month no films have been shown? Are they or are they not going to give work gloves to the branch-cutters? Want more? When is an outhouse going to be put up in the logging sector?"

"Quiet, quiet!" Khuriev shouted. "Complaints in the prescribed manner, through the brigadiers! And now, you're all dismissed!"

Everyone grumbled a little and went off.

Toward six o'clock, the prisoners began to gather near the library. Here, in what had been the shipping workshop, general assemblies were held. The wooden barn without windows could hold about five hundred people.

The prisoners had shaven and cleaned their shoes. The one who served as the zone barber was the murderer Mamedov. Every time he opened his razor, Mamedov would say, "One little slit and there goes your soul!" This was his favorite professional joke.

The camp administrators had put on full dress uniform. Political Instructor Khuriev's boots reflected the dim lights which twinkled above the "open-fire" corridor. The civilian women who worked in the Division of Economic Administration smelled of powerful eau de cologne. The male office workers wore their imported jackets.

The barn was still closed. Re-enlistees crowded near the entrance. Inside, final preparations for the ceremonial were still going on. Brigadier Agoshin of the production brigade was fastening a banner above the door. Letters in yellow gouache had been painstakingly stenciled onto a crimson background: "The Party is our Helmsman!"

Khuriev was issuing his final directions. He was surrounded by Tsurikov, Gesha, and Tamara. I also drew near them.

Khuriev said, "If everything ends well, I will give each of you a week off. Besides that, a visiting performance is being planned for Ropcha."

"Where's that?" Lebedyeva asked with interest.

"In Switzerland," Gurin answered.

At six-thirty, the barn doors were thrown open. The prisoners noisily took places on the wooden benches. Three guards carried in chairs for members of the presidium. The highest officials moved in a stately line down the aisle toward the stage.

The hall became quiet. Someone clapped uncertainly. Others joined him.

Khuriev rose before the microphone. The P.I. smiled, showing his trusty silver crowns. Then he glanced at a piece of paper and began, "It is already three-score years. . . ."

As usual, the microphone wasn't working. Khuriev raised his voice. "It is already three-score years. . . . Do you hear me?"

Instead of answering, someone called from the audience, "For sixty years we haven't seen freedom!"

Captain Tokar rose slightly, to remember the transgressor.

Khuriev now spoke even louder. He listed the main accomplishments of Soviet power. Recalled the victory over Germany. Threw light on the current political situation. Fleetingly touched on the problem of the all-out building of Communism.

After him, a major from Syktyvkara spoke. His speech was about escapes and camp discipline. The major spoke softly; no one listened.

Then Lieutenant Rodichev came out on stage. He began his speech like this: "Among the people, a document was born. . . ." What followed was something like a list of socialist resolutions. One phrase stuck in my mind: ". . . to reduce the number of camp murders by twenty-six percent. . . ."

Close to an hour had gone by. Prisoners were conversing quietly, smoking. In the back rows they were already playing cards. Guards moved along the walls noiselessly.

Then Khuriev announced, "The concert!"

First on was a zek I didn't know, who read two of Krylov's fables. To portray the dragonfly, he rolled open a paper fan. Switching over to the ant, he dug and swung an imaginary shovel.

Then Tarasyuk, manager of the bathhouse, juggled electric

lightbulbs. The number of them kept increasing. For the finale, Tarasyuk tossed them all up in the air at once, then stretched out his elastic waistband, and all the lightbulbs fell into his loose satin pants.

Then Lieutenant Rodichev read a poem by Mayakovsky. He stood with his feet wide apart and tried to speak in a bass voice.

He was succeeded by the recidivist Shumanya, who performed without accompaniment a tap dance called "The Little Gypsy Girl." As he was being applauded, he exclaimed, "Too bad—without patent leather boots you don't get the full effect."

Then they announced a camp *kapo*, Loginov, "accompanied by a guitar." Loginov walked out, bowed, touched the strings and sang:

A gypsy reads my cards, her eyes cast down,
An ancient necklace and a string of beads.
I wanted to try Fate for a queen of diamonds
But once again it was the ace of spades.

Why is it, my unhappy fate,
Again you lead me on a road of tears?
The barbed wire's rusty, the iron bars close,
A railway prison car, the noise of wheels. . . .

They applauded Loginov for a long time and called for him to sing an encore. However, Khuriev was against it. He walked out and said, "As they say, the good in little doses."

Then he adjusted his chest strap, waited for silence and shouted out, "The revolutionary play, 'Kremlin Stars.' The roles will be played by inmates of the Ust-Vym Camp complex. Vladimir Ilych Lenin—prisoner Gurin. Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky—prisoner Tsurikov. Red Army soldier Timofey—prisoner Chmykhalov. The merchant's daughter Polina—Administration Management worker Lebedyeva Tamara Evgenievna. . . . And so, Moscow, 1918."

Khuriev backed off the stage. A chair and a blue plywood stool were carried onto the proscenium. Then Tsurikov climbed up on-stage wearing the khaki tunic. He scratched his leg, sat down, and fell into deep thought. Then he remembered that he was sick, and began to force a cough. He coughed so hard that the tunic came up out of his belt.

Meanwhile, there was still no sign of Lenin. From the wings, a stagehand belatedly brought out a telephone without a cord. Tsuri-

kov stopped coughing, picked up the receiver, and fell into even greater thought.

A few emboldened prisoners in the audience started yelling, "Come on, Stilts, don't drag this out!"

At that moment, Lenin appeared carrying an enormous yellow suitcase. "Greetings, Felix Edmundovich."

"Hello there," Dzerzhinsky answered without getting up.

Gurin set down the suitcase, squinted cunningly, and asked, "Do you know, Felix Edmundovich, what I have here in my hand?"

"A suitcase, Vladimir Ilych."

"And just what it's for—can you guess?"

"Haven't the slightest idea." Tsurikov even turned away slightly, showing complete indifference.

From the audience, some shouted again, "Get up, Stilts! What kind of a way is that to talk to the Boss?"

"Sha!" Tsurikov answered. "We know about that. . . . There are too many of you here overeducated." Reluctantly, he rose slightly.

Gurin waited for silence and continued. "The little suitcase is for you, Felix Edmundovich. So that you, dear fellow, can go off to take a rest at once."

"I can't, Vladimir Ilych. There's counterrevolution all around us. The Mensheviks, the Social Revolutionaries," Tsurikov glanced angrily at the audience, "bourgeois . . . what do you call them?"

"Scouts?" Gurin prompted.

"'At's it, 'at's it. . . ."

"Your health, Felix Edmundovich, belongs to the Revolution. The comrades and I discussed it and decided: you must take a rest. I say this to you as a member of the ruling body."

Tsurikov was silent.

"Do you understand me, Felix Edmundovich?"

"I understand," Tsurikov replied, and grinned stupidly. It was blatantly obvious that he had forgotten his lines.

Khuriev came near the stage and whispered loudly, "'Do what you want . . .'"

"And what can I want to do," Tsurikov said in the same loud whisper, "if my memory's gone full of holes?"

"'Do what you want,'" the P.I. repeated louder, "'but I'm not leaving service.'"

"Everything's clear," Tsurikov said. "I'm not leaving—"

Lenin interrupted him. "The main asset of the Revolution is

people. To care for them is our arch-important task. So get your things together, and to the Crimea, dear fellow, to the Crimea!"

"It's still early, Vladimir Ilych, it's still early. Let us first finish with the Mensheviks, decapitate the bourgeois cobra —"

"Not cobra, but hydra," Khuriev said.

"Same bugger," Dzerzhinsky said, and waved his hand.

Beyond that, everything went more or less smoothly. Lenin reasoned, Dzerzhinsky wouldn't give in. A few times, Tsurikov raised his voice shrilly.

Then Timofey came out on stage. Lieutenant Rodichev's leather jacket did remind one of the double-breasted, chekist *toujourka*. Polina asked him to go to the ends of the earth with her.

"To do in General Wrangel and the White Army, is it?" Timofey asked, and grabbed his imaginary Mauser.

From the audience, zeks yelled, "Play your hearts, Clean-Up! Drag her to your berth! Show us something's still clucking in your pants!"

Lebedyeva stamped her foot wrathfully, straightened her velvet dress, and again drew near Timofey. "You've ruined the best years of my life! You've left me, I'm all alone now like a mountain ash in a meadow."

But the sympathy of the public was with Timofey. Their cries carried from the hall: "Look how she's laying it on, the bitch! You can see her candle's burning out!"

Others yelled back, "Don't frighten the actress, you goats! Let the showing continue!"

Then the barn door slammed open and Security Officer Bortashevich cried, "Legal convoy, report for duty! Lopatin, Gusev, Koralis — get your weapons! Sergeant Lakhno, go for documents on the double!"

Four of the guards headed for the door. "Excuse me," Bortashevich said.

"Continue," Khuriev said, and waved his hand.

The performance moved to the final scene. The suitcase was stored away for better times. Felix Dzerzhinsky stayed at his battle post. The merchant daughter Polina forgot her personal claims. . . .

Khuriev sought me out with his eyes and nodded with satisfaction. In the first row, Major Amosov squinted contentedly.

Finally, Vladimir Ilych stepped up to the microphone. For a few seconds he was silent. Then his face lit up with the light of historical prescience. "Who is this?" Gurin exclaimed. "Who is this?"

Out of the darkness, thin pale faces focused on the leader.

"Who is this? Whose are these happy, young faces? Whose are these cheerful, sparkling eyes? Can it really be the youth of the seventies?"

Romantic notes sounded in the voice of the actor. His speech was colored with unfeigned excitement. He gesticulated. His powerful palm, covered with tatoos, swept upwards. "Can it really be the splendid grandchildren of the Revolution?"

At first, there were a few uncertain laughs from the first row. After a few seconds, everyone was laughing hard. You could hear Major Amosov's bass in the general chorus. Lebedyeva yelped in a reedy voice. Chmykhalov held his sides. Onstage, Tsurikov took off his beard and shyly laid it beside the telephone.

Vladimir Ilych tried to speak. "I envy you, messengers of the future! It was for you that we lit the first lights of the housing structures. It was for your sake . . . Hear me out, you dogs! There's just a sparrow's beak of this junk left!"

The hall answered Gurin with a terrible, irrepressible yell: "Die, Lisper, before the Rule of the No-Termers!"

"Hey, whoever's closest, give that Maupassant a good tickle!"

"Beat it, uncle, your pretzels are burning!"

Khuriev pushed through to the stage and tugged at the leader's pants. "Sing!"

"Already?" Gurin asked. "There are literally two lines left. About the bourgeoisie and the stars."

"Forget the bourgeoisie. Go on to the stars. And start the 'Internationale' right away."

"Whatever you say." Straining his voice to the utmost, Gurin yelled, "Cut the noise!" Then he added, in a vengeful tone, "So then let your way be lighted, children of the future, by our Kremlin stars!"

"Let's go!" Khuriev ordered, and then, lifting a rifle cleaning-rod, he began to conduct.

The hall became a little quieter. Gurin broke into song in an unexpectedly beautiful, pure and ringing tenor:

Arise, you prisoners of starvation. . . .

And further, in the silence that had fallen:

Arise, you wretched of the earth . . .

Suddenly he became strangely transformed. Now he was a country peasant, mysterious and cunning, like his recent ancestors. His face seemed aloof and coarse. His eyes were half closed.

All of a sudden, someone began to sing with him. At first, one uncertain voice, then a second and a third. And then a whole dissonant, unorganized chorus of voices:

For Justice thunders on damnation,
A better world in birth.

"Tis the final conflict, let each stand in his place. . . ."

The multitude of faces joined into one trembling spot. The actors on stage froze. Lebedyeva pressed her hands to her temples. Khuriev waved his cleaning rod. A strange, dreamy smile had set on the lips of the leader of the Revolution.

No more shall chains of violence bind us,
Arise, you slaves, no more in thrall,
The earth shall rise on new foundations. . . .

Suddenly, my throat contracted painfully. For the first time, I was part of my unique, unprecedented country. I was entirely made of cruelty, hunger, memory, malice. . . . From tears, I couldn't see for a moment. I don't think anyone noticed.

And then the singing died down. The last stanza was finished out by a few isolated, embarrassed voices.

"The performance is over!" Khuriev said.

Overturning the benches, the prisoners headed for the door.

Translated by Anne Frydman

Frank Kermode

THE DECLINE OF THE MAN OF LETTERS

In July 1899, Arnold Bennett, not thirty-two years of age, was still in the first stages of a literary career. He had written one thoughtful novel, *The Man from the North*; he had sold some stories, and he was a practiced journalist, working on a woman's paper. Like many aspiring writers, though perhaps with more assiduity than most, he kept a journal. Over many years he set down in this journal anything that might be of value to him as a professional writer: books read, plays seen, meals eaten, people met, the number of words written, the income they produced. At the height of his fame these figures were truly prodigious, but in 1899 he was still only on the threshold of fame, beginning to prosper but still aspiring.

One day in July 1899 he mentions that he has bought a hundred volumes of a classics series issued by the publisher Bohn. These books, which you will still sometimes see in secondhand shops, were the Penguin classics of their day, but their sober bindings are not invitations to impulse-buying, and a hundred of them in a row might be thought to constitute less a promise of immediately accessible bliss than a serious call to membership of an elite, the elite of the truly literary, of *bookmen*, to use the periodic expression. It was admittedly characteristic of Arnold Bennett to buy the classics in batches of a hundred at a discount, but his prime object was to join that elite.

Having unpacked the books, he sampled his new possessions by cutting the pages of *Juvenal*; and at once he came upon something of unusual interest. For, as the *Journal* tells us, "the celebrated and marvellous passage in Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster*, about marrying a 'mountain girl,' in which occur the lines: 'And bear at her big breasts/ My large coarse issue,' must certainly be based on a passage in Juvenal's *Sixth Satire*." The lines he had in mind are these:

some mountain girl
Beaten with winds, chaste as the hardened rocks
Whereon she dwelt, that might have strewed my bed
With leaves and reeds, and with the skin of beasts,
Our neighbors, and have borne at her big breasts
My large coarse issue . . . (*Philaster*, IV.iii 7-12)

Editor's Note: This article was first presented as a talk given at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, on February 9, 1983.

It's worth noting that Bennett's quotation is slightly inaccurate; he obviously didn't need to look the passage up. He was right about the borrowing from Juvenal, for the whole speech is a paraphrase of the opening lines of the *Sixth Satire*. They say that in the age of Saturn women were both chaste and tough; that they lacked what Dryden in his translation calls "the niceness of our modern dames"; big and bold, they "gave suck to infants of gigantic mold."

Bennett's pleasure in this observation is very appealing. It must have helped to confirm his sense of himself as a man of letters. He isn't pretending to be a scholar: he doesn't ask himself whether he was the first to notice Fletcher's borrowing (he wasn't) and he doesn't meditate on the significance of the Jacobean imitation of Juvenal in a play designed for a new indoor theatre at Blackfriars, or the relationship of *Philaster* to *Cymbeline*, which was the subject of a book by the American scholar A. H. Thorndike a couple of years later. Bennett was not a professor, nor was he an amateur. He was a professional writer, and in his day professional writers were still bookmen.

Among the subjects with which a bookman of the time would wish to be acquainted were the classics (available, as we've seen, in bulk) and the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. A great revival of interest in that drama had been under way for some time, and its principal sponsors were not academics, but rather men of letters like Swinburne and Arthur Symonds. To read a Jacobean play, to note its long reach across time to a first-century poem, was thus a proper activity for a bookman. In Bennett's case it was perhaps rather marginal to his main business; he read Dostoevsky, for instance, in a different spirit (read him indeed in French, and long before the vogue) because to do so might help him in his writing. (In fact the experience caused him to feel badly about his own work in progress, *Clayhanger*.) In *The Old Wives' Tale*, he sought, he tells us, to catch the tone of Tolstoy's *Ivan Ilyich*. But he also had a sense of the way in which literature as a whole bears upon any individual work; so that one needed to know the classics, including the English classics. And as one also needed an audience with some literary knowledge, he decided, with his usual energy, to do something about providing the necessary instruction. There had been a large expansion in the potential reading public, caused by the onset of low-grade universal education; the consequent demand for low-grade reading matter was met by such papers as *Titbits*. Before we call that wholly deplorable, we should reflect that not only Bennett but Conrad made their debuts in *Titbits*; some writers, to be sure, simply turned

their backs on this new audience—Gissing is a famous example, preferring poverty to the readership of what he called “the quarter-educated.” But Bennett decided to do something about it, and in 1909 wrote a book called *Literary Taste: How to Form It*. In it he tried to purge literary culture of its class associations. Taste, he affirmed, is not a matter of merely elegant accomplishment, a “certificate of correct culture.” It is a matter rather of wanting to live to the full; not to know literature is not to be alive. Surround yourself with books, he advises; create a bookish atmosphere, cultivate the classics. Don’t bother to take courses in literature or study it chronologically; “wherever you happen to be, that is the centre of literature.” He adds that if you buy your books in large enough quantities you can insist that the bookseller give you a discount large enough to purchase the thirty-shilling three-volume *Chambers’ Cyclopaedia of Literature*.

It was this sort of advice that gave Bennett his reputation as a vulgar fellow, a reputation greatly enhanced by his later *Evening Standard* book columns, which gave him enormous power in the world of books but cost him the respect of the discerning (yet those columns compare very well, as to the range and quality of judgement, with anything of the kind available today). Some of his points you might have thought the learned would approve. For instance, he endorsed Mark Pattison’s pronouncement that you can’t call yourself a booklover unless you spend five percent of your income on books. Ben Jonson, Campion, Fletcher, Webster, Tourneur, Ford, and dozens of others could be had at one shilling each; so a clerk making two pounds a week could be expected to acquire a hundred volumes a year. Bennett’s canon contains a lot of books long since consigned to limbo, but the same fate would attend almost anyone’s attempt to achieve the same end, which was to establish a community of literacy in which his own and comparable work could live and impart the means of life.

Gissing could have told him it wouldn’t work, and Bennett, being a highly adaptable man, inevitably wrote for two audiences, one perceptive and the other not. For example, he was to take legitimate pride in the mastery of *Riceman Steps*, a novel that should not be forgotten when the achievements of the *anni mirabiles*, the early twenties, are celebrated; but he condemned the public for seizing on the wrong reason for admiring it. They ignored the art of the book and formed an attachment to its portrait of a kindhearted charwoman; Bennet thought this deplorable, but still wrote a sequel about the charwoman expressly designed to cash in on that misreading. He

knew the marketplace and understood that novels were commodities as well as art. Gissing could never manage that double vision; he was a genuine classic, and his way of signalling that he was happy — a sufficiently rare occurrence — was to chant a chorus of Sophocles. His multiple self-portrait in *New Grub Street* gives a fair impression of Gissing's notion of the fate of the bookman in a world where writing and reading have, like everything else, to meet a market; a world in which men who would prefer to be writing essays on Harington's *Oceana* or on some Latin poet must toil endlessly at novels. Lost in this new world of mercenary publishers, fickle readers, *rusé* agents, and, worst of all, admen, he resigned himself to a sort of wretched one-man Bohemia. As is well known, he had particularly strong adverse feelings about women, not only because the kind one might want would not stoop to marry penniless novelists, but also because they were a large part of the reading public and lowered the level of its intelligence. According to Gissing, the average intelligence of women was about equal to that of male idiots.

Whether Gissing's obsession with poverty arose from his social and sexual difficulties, or the other way round, is not now my subject. He was at all events a man of letters, born, as he thought, out of his time, with what he came to think an irrelevant interest in that classical tradition to which Bennett paid his less-learned respects. (No work of Gissing's says more about this side of him than the novella, *Sleeping Fires*, in which a man is united with his lost son by a chance encounter with the boy and his tutor in Athens. The man had not married the boy's mother [it was a firm principle of Gissing's that sexual misery should not be compounded by shotgun marriages] and his youthful indiscretion had cost him the love of a woman he did wish to marry. Moreover, the boy dies, in Greece, of a fever. But against this background of loss the story of the establishment of a tie between generations by the catalytic action of Greece — the real thing, mountain and temple but also a language bathed in Ionian light — indicates what for Gissing was the importance of the past in the formation of a civil modernity, past and present in dignified interdependence.) Gissing could not have borne a future which assumed literature, indeed art in general, to be possible without that relationship with the tradition. He shared with Bennett a friend who could very easily bear that thought, namely H. G. Wells. Wells felt no conscious duty to a literary past; his famous insult to Henry James was an insult to that past and the sensibility that might accrue from its contemplation. His friendship with Gissing

was genuine and lasted till death; yet he spoke of him in tones of sarcastic pity. He was not really a bookman at all, acknowledging no classic; he was a writer and a popularizer, and science was to him what Sophocles was to Gissing.

The three of them may suggest something of the qualities of a literary culture different from our own. Yet the marketplace of *Tit-bits*, of the unprecedentedly powerful and irresponsible newspaper tycoons, of new competitive publishing houses built on the ruins of the sedate old ones, is not without a family resemblance to ours. In Edward Garnett, we identify the father of many famous literary midwives, in Pinker the archetype of agents. In that age, as now, great fortunes were made by writers—by Bennett and Kipling, Galsworthy and Wells, to say nothing of the bestsellers, the Elinor Glyns. But the market didn't crush all who refused to play it; there was Conrad, choosing with his customary perversity to commence author at this moment, and in his third language at that; and there was still that avant-garde of bookmen, the innovators, the transmitters, of whom Arthur Symons is the type. There was Henry James, writing in these years the great Prefaces to his New York Edition; there was Ford Madox Ford, passionate for the past and the present of letters; and, over the horizon, Pound and Wyndham Lewis and Eliot, who would also play their part in the making of our different world, our different view of what it is to profess letters.

* * *

However new the world may appear, it discloses on examination continuities with old worlds. The lot of the run-of-the-mill professional has always been hard. For instance, relations between authors and readers have never, at any rate since the invention of printing, been very direct. There is always a middleman, printer or stationer, or several middlemen. At first the author simply sold his book to somebody else, who turned it into a commercial product for his own profit, possessing the copyright and paying no royalty (a situation which persisted to plague Hardy and Gissing, and indeed, in the backwaters of scholarly publishing, even me). Authors were quick to see themselves as exploited primary producers. "While they did like fleas, but sucke now and then a dropp of the writers blood from him . . . it was somewhat tollerable," complains an Elizabethan author of publishers, "but since they began to feed on him, like the third plague of *Aegypt* without remooving . . . I say . . . it

is high time to seek a remedy." Squeezed between rapacious stationers and grudging patrons, this writer and his fellows nevertheless provided the reading public with an ample supply of cheap books. The early part of Elizabeth's reign also saw a substantial advance in public education, though after 1580 it ceased in a time of inflation, unemployment, and heavy defense expenditure. Admissions to the two universities slumped and did not recover until well into the next century, nor were there in England the same inducements to literacy as in Sweden, where communion and the right to marry were withheld from the illiterate. By 1750 Sweden had universal literacy; here in New England, by 1660, sixty percent of men and thirty percent of women were literate; but in England at that date very few women could read, and even in 1750 only thirty-six percent could sign their names in marriage registers. So difficult is it to create and maintain a reading public. For a long time that English public was relatively small, mostly men—and mostly in cities, especially London. It is hardly surprising that the market was competitive from the outset, and that Grub Street was in existence *avant la lettre*. We know of Robert Greene's resentment at the intrusion of a nonuniversity man, Shakespeare, into the literary world, and Henslowe's diary testifies to the small size of the scraps that had to be fought for. By Pope's time the polite, reading world was larger, though the reading public as a whole had perhaps not greatly increased; Grub Street now had a particular locality—it was a slum at Moorfield, and Pope made it a myth. *The Dunciad* rightly observes that "Dulness and Poverty" are the causes of bad writing; and Martin Scriblerus, commenting on the poem, remarks that its author "lived in those days when (after providence had permitted the Invention of Printing as a scourge for the sins of the learned) paper also became so cheap, and printers so numerous, that a deluge of authors cover'd the land: Whereby not only the peace of the honest unwriting subject was daily molested, but unmerciful demands were made of his applause, yea of his money by such as would neither earn the one nor deserve the other. . . ." And Pope fables that the wretched inhabitants of Grub Street, formerly confined to the City, proceed westward to take over the polite world; instead of learning moving westward, as of old, its opposite, "Dulness" does so, producing a new antirecreation, an uncreating Word.

The public rearranges itself from time to time; at one moment there will be a sufficient audience for Addison, and later for Johnson's periodicals, and for Richardson's *Clarissa*: an educated

middleclass audience of which the remnant still survives. But Grub Street, as Pope prophesied, made continuous inroads. In the nineteenth century the history of the man of letters, as admirably told by John Gross in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters* (1969) is largely a civic history; the great reviews we associate with London or Edinburgh or Boston, and not with universities; the grandest and most useful and influential editors, the Leslie Stephenses, may have had university connections but lived near the marketplace. They catered to the audience described by George Saintsbury as "the general congregation of decently educated and intelligent people." At this time the bookman could make a better living than at any other. And as Gross suggests, nothing more surely indicated the coming changes than the translation of Saintsbury to the Regius Chair at Edinburgh University, and of Sir Arthur Quiller Couch to the New King Edward VII Chair at Cambridge.

For the literary profession, and the literary world, were about to divide and reform in a fashion we can recognize as our own. There were two developments that seem decisive. One was the growth in authority of what, for want of a better word, I call the *avant-garde*. I have spoken of Bennett, a man who went to no university but read widely in English and other literatures because it seemed to him part of his mystery to do so. But I also mentioned Arthur Symons: he was interested in Jacobean drama, but also in Wagner, in music hall, in French Symbolist poetry, in a great many other things, about all of which he wrote incessantly. He was a poet, a verse dramatist, an editor, the friend and counselor of Yeats, acquainted with all the significant figures of the age. His most celebrated book, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, appeared as it were on cue in 1899. He wrote more subtle books, but none more influential. T. S. Eliot is well known to have remarked that *The Symbolist Movement*, which he acquired while at Harvard University, "affected the course of his life"; it was the work that introduced him to that French poetry which, in a highly personal blend with Dante and the metaphysical poets and the Jacobean dramatists, formed the program for Eliot's criticism and poetry. Indeed there are poems of Symons that sound like pre-echoes of "Prufrock." And with his interest in dancing and music hall, his perhaps short-lived respect for Wagner, as well as in the ways I have already suggested, Eliot is a little like an updated and of course superior Symons. Some of the more decadent tones he happily missed, perhaps by being an American and a pupil of Babbitt and Royce. And certainly *The*

Sacred Wood is finer criticism than Symons could aspire to. Yet the resemblance is there, and not without importance; only it was Eliot who had the more powerful and permanent effect on taste. It was from him and not from Symons that we learned for ourselves the mutual relevance of all these disparate interests, from him that we learned how to read Middleton much as we should read Dante, seeking out, responding to, and discoursing upon, the "bewildering minute" of poetry, yet seeing literature not as a collection of such moments but as a mappable whole, as a tradition, as a canon, in a difficult sense that was far beyond anything Bennett, cracking open his *Juvenal*, could have conceived.

Although he was twenty years Bennett's junior, Eliot lived in the same literary world. For all his philosophical learning, he set up not as a don but as a publisher, editor, and poet. He consulted Bennett about "Sweeney Agonistes," but there can have been little sympathy between them, the entrepreneur and the conservative *avant-gardiste*, and there are hostile portraits of Bennett in the work of Eliot's intimates, Pound and Wyndham Lewis, to say nothing of the frontal assault of another friend, Virginia Woolf. Yet they both came, by their different routes, out of the bookman's world of the turn of the century, they are alike in rejecting schismatic modernism. In postwar Europe it was not unreasonable to believe that the past might perish. The moment of Eliot's earliest and perhaps most influential criticism is also the moment of Dada, a modernism intent on the annihilation of the past; but Eliot, committed to his own version of the modern, rejected Dada as part of a foreign nihilism, "a diagnosis," he wrote, "of a disease of the French mind." "Whatever lesson we extract from it will not be directly applicable to London." It is the sort of thing the English literary man always says when threatened with more French nonsense; we hear it today, most often from people who have given too little thought to the matter in hand. Not so Eliot; that the destruction of the past was not a cause that ought to have the support of an Anglo-American man of letters was a sound position then, as it still is. So the sponsor of tradition, in however refined a sense (for, as Harry Levin once remarked, Eliot was the first to use the word to mean not something that was handed to you, but something you had with great labor to find), maintained that the modern man of letters, like his predecessors, had obligations to the past more profound and difficult than Bennett, rejoicing over *Philaster*, could have dreamed of.

So much for the first of the alterations I have mentioned, the

growth in authority of the avant-garde. The second and more drastic was the takeover of letters by the universities. Eliot's new sketch map of literature was eventually to be the chart of literature professors, but its impact on the profession of letters began before that. You won't find it easy to name an important critic who was a critic and nothing else; that is, until quite recently. The world is now full of literary critics, some held to be important, who do nothing else but literary criticism, and they all work in universities. The success of university "English" was not premeditated, but it has affected our letters much as the invention of printing, the manufacture of cheap paper, the leisure of the bourgeoisie, the abandonment of the circulating library three-decker, or any other strictly extraliterary force has done. The first casualty was the bookman. He died, and his place was taken by the university critic.

English departments weren't founded for the purpose of mass-producing critics. In the United States, the speech department had an obvious social role. In England the two principal universities did not teach English until the present century, but departments existed elsewhere and offered some education in the vernacular classics to people unqualified for the study of the real classics at Oxford and Cambridge, by virtue of their being women, dissenters, Jews, or poor. The model they chose was of course classical philology. This became the case, as matters developed, in the United States also; hence the journal titles, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, *Modern Philology*. At University College in London, where they established the first English Chair of English in 1832, the dry philological tradition (lots of Old English, placename study, "language" in all its aspects) was still strong when I arrived there in the sixties, though major change was wanted by most people. For a long time the *Weltanschauung* was a curious blend of Arnold and Skeat. The training of ordinary readers was no longer a real concern. And as departments expanded, it was assumed that the essential qualification of teachers should be *research*; we should match the natural science department by performing in philology the sort of research they did: factual, cumulative.

John Gross attaches importance to the foundation of the *Modern Language Review* in 1905. In the first number, W. W. Greg, a private scholar, dismissed Professor Churton Collins's edition of Robert Greene as the work of "an arm-chair editor." The professionals had arrived. Soon the wave of the New Bibliography broke over Shakespeare. "By the 1920s," says Gross, "a mood of sombre profes-

sionalism had set in. . . . The apparatchiks were in full command and it was too late to change the patterns which had been laid down."

I think this is true, even though philology in that older austere sense soon lost some of its hold. In England the major change came with the experiments of I. A. Richards at Cambridge, themselves made possible by the decision of bookman Professor Quiller Couch to exclude Old English and leave it to the archaeologists. Richards discovered that apparently highly educated people couldn't really read poetry, and his methods of teaching, founded not in philology but in philosophy and psychology, were devised to teach reading. Later he extended his program and tried to teach the whole world to read. *But in that attempt he had no success. It was two of his associates who really changed the world of university criticism: Leavis, with a mystique of a Cambridge elite trained by non-philological critical methods; and Empson, bold, restlessly interdisciplinary, with a poet's attitude to fact and theory. Even before 1939, members of my generation were taking their cues from these critics. In the United States, the change came when the New Critics got themselves into the universities.*

Yet Gross is right about the unchangeable course of the professional institution. "Research" was still necessary to advancement. After the war the universities expanded greatly, and in the sixties they expanded again; and in that expansion English grew enormously, partly because of the increasingly monoglot nature of the intake. As the teachers, themselves increasingly monoglot, grew into a great company, they developed more intense specializations and wrote more and more books. First they taught the whole field of English literature, but did research in only one area; then they did research and also taught in only one area. As the books multiplied, it seemed less and less possible to master even one aspect of the subject. In the sixties, also the period of student unrest, many professors moved up a level to theoretical work in its nature not directly literary at all. A generation of metacritics sprang up. The languages of criticism and of metacriticism grew more and more arcane and now seem to the educated outsider impenetrable or perhaps gibberish.

Of course the constituency is now so large that work of this kind still finds publishers and readers; and some of it is very exciting, for when there are literally thousands of critics around, it is likely that some will be people of force and intelligence. Certainly one doesn't want them to stop doing what they do. Only one wonders whether

their pupils, their epigoni, to use a more loaded word, will be fit or willing to attend to the more routine pastoral duties, by the performance of which some sort of literary public is maintained and renewed. For we know the opinion of Paul de Man, which favors the diminution of classes, so that literature departments would be reduced to cells in which an elite studied rhetoric and poetics.

You may ask what this has to do with people outside the English departments. The answer is, a great deal. Those who study literature at less refined levels, in the colleges and universities, must, as I've suggested, now form the greater part of the reading public. We should think hard before we say we wish it otherwise. And if we want to retain such a public we need, among other things, to rethink the question of the relation of the educated reader to the literary past. Literary history is nowadays often said to be a most problematic undertaking; yet some transformation of it seems necessary. We have grown accustomed to having students who know nothing of the classical languages and very little of the modern, except their own. We have acquiesced in this change; should it not strike us that we have too casually concurred also in the neglect of that past to which Bennett was delighted to pay his respects? It is at any rate an interesting reflection that in a period when more people study (rather than simply read) literature than ever before, the sense of a literary past has grown ever more faint.

And what of the public that remains outside the classroom? In general its expert advisers are university teachers moonlighting in the newspapers. I have long been one of them. Mostly we try to use simpler language, but except when we are writing for papers which have a high proportion of university or university-educated readers, papers such as the *London Review of Books* or the *New York Review of Books*, we rarely seem certain of our audience, rarely seem to care much whether the mass of readers can be interested in our notices or indeed in the books we review. One notes a sort of offhandedness, a frivolity—uneasy demonstrations of a vaguely sensed obligation to amuse. In the *London Sunday Times* there was recently a review of the first volume of the Oxford edition of Tennyson's letters. Its author, a distinguished Tennysonian, began thus, "What a *hog* that Alfred is and what can you expect from a pig but a grunt.' Alfred Tennyson's disgruntled relation Edwin Tennyson d'Eyncourt could hardly have been rasher." To whom is the reader's attention directed? Not to Tennyson but to the clever reviewer. Here is an odd recrudescence of Grub Street; it reminds us, for all its cleverness or

sprightliness, of one of Pope's dunces, "light-arm'd with Points, Antitheses, and Puns." It would unfortunately be easy to multiply instances, but one will serve.

It is perhaps useless to enlarge the complaint. Larger questions impose themselves. The passing of the bookman, we are often told, will be followed by the passing of the book. At such a moment of crisis, it must seem curious that the bookman's successor, the university critic, should be so intent on establishing for himself a wholly novel position of dignity and authority, and a new sort of isolation from the larger literary public. The old style bookman was always something else as well as a critic: a poet and critic, a writer and critic. Now the wholly professional, single-skilled critic—who, though often reluctantly, earns his bread as a teacher—makes the claim that criticism *is* poetry, that he is the creator.

Structuralism, in its purer literary form (now extinct), abolished history but also abolished "the subject," in this case the author. He was repeatedly said to have died. But in the age of poststructuralisms the author returns, the critic is major man. It is true that earlier critics made comparable claims: Oscar Wilde did it with impudent grandeur. But the argument now is different: the collapse of the hierarchies of discourse means that all writers are the same sort of writer; critics are poets, and so are dunces. Thus by an odd change in the practice of criticism the critic, a mere fragment left over from the broken figure of the man of letters, resumes all the titles to which his ancestor, when intact, could lay claim.

Helen Vendler recently adverted to this state of things in an address to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on "The Function of Criticism." She seemed to disapprove of the new claims, holding that "ideally" the critic "is the artist himself; at second-best, he is the artist *manqué*." The suggestion that inspiration has a part in the critical process was certainly right; and I daresay she might agree that some of it ought to derive from, and in its turn contribute to, the preservation, with all necessary alterations of perspective, of a literary past, a tradition.

Of course this tradition can no longer be represented as given, static, explicable without interference by the critical instrument. We can no more return to the old notions of history, or of tradition, than we can revive the bookman; yet criticism, if it is not to become a sterile and purely autonomous activity, must put other notions in their place. As an activity with some responsibility to society as a

whole, it need somehow be a historical activity. The practitioner, doubtless with a very modern awareness of the discomforts of his position, must reenact the texts of another time in his very modern (and so consciously restricted, historically limited) mind; and he must do so with as much respect as possible for the original circumstances of that text. When Symons wrote on the Jacobeans and on Blake and Wagner, when Eliot studied Dante and Marvell and Laforgue, they were doing exactly that, and they were doing it as part of the necessary program of the modern. Of course they did the work, each in his degree, with the assurance of artists; and so, in his degree, did Bennett. It is taken for granted among such people that the truth of art and the truth of criticism depend upon just such a confluence of horizons. One emblem of this confidence might be the aging Yeats passionately reading Berkeley and Plotinus, and writing *A Vision*. I suppose academic historians find it difficult to take that book seriously, hardly knowing what to do with a universal history that is meant to provide "metaphors for poetry." And yet in art it is just such visionary history that best preserves the past alive in the present: we have our examples in Eliot, in Picasso, in the quotations and transformations of much modern music.

The critic may not make so free. His contribution to our sense of the original plenitude of a text takes the form not of new text but of comment. There are, or there ought to be, hermeneutical rules governing comment. I do not mean the one that says that critics can use a sort of time machine and confront the text as it was in its beginning. That rule won't work. The encounter with an old text must be made by a critic who breathes his own air and knows what it is that debars him from replicating the original experience. He may of course think of the experience as his frankly unattainable goal. Between the original and his word there stretches the tradition in which he was formed. Sometimes it is fallacious, purblind, provincial; but it is by imaginatively taking note of his descent from it, and recognizing the impermanence and temporal provinciality of his own position, that the critic should pay his tribute to past and present. Wallace Stevens thought of poems, even the best, as ephemeral, as way stations on the road to an unattainable Supreme Fiction. Criticism might learn from that, and think of itself as notes toward an unattainable supreme interpretation. Or, to put it another way, placed as we are in time, we have to make do with the *sensus* as we perceive it, and merely conjecture a *sententia* always

beyond our reach. Good criticism is always related to what has been said before, yet is always saying something new and creating the possibility of later, unimagined imaginings.

I introduced these words *sensus* and *sententia* because I have been reading an admirable essay on Dante by John Ahern: he believes that the great lines near the end of the *Paradiso*, the vision of all the scattered pages of the world bound up into one volume, *legato con amore in un volume*, speaks not only of God so binding together the substance and accidents of the universe into one, but also of the world that is Dante's own book, issued first in parts, bound up by readers when complete. Then they may see it, as God in the light of eternity sees the world. It becomes a whole. Where they had seen only the separate senses, they could now see the whole sentence, the simultaneous meaning of the poem, transcending the scattered parts: the *supreme* sense, the *supreme* fiction. And as I read Mr. Ahern's article, I remembered that Dante too was familiar with the concept of the *aevum*, that order between time and eternity which was the time of the angels, but also constituted the temporal order in which certain human institutions existed: corporations, kingship, academies, institutions established by mortals yet sempiternal; neither eternal nor of time. Years ago I tried to find a use for this concept in the consideration of fictional time; now I see it as a figure for the relationship between interpretation, which belongs to time, and the text interpreted, which may be, figuratively, of a different temporal order. The book, in the form handed down to us in the Christian tradition, is another emblem; it offers a temporal sequence but also stability of relationship between one part and another, as if they had existence beyond the temporal sequence. That is why Dante used it as the great figure of the universe. And in the light of some approximation to the *sententia*, which is all that is at any moment accessible to us, we can look afresh at the *sensus*.

The tradition of letters may be thought of as such a book. When Arnold Bennett caught the reflection of Juvenal in *Philaster* (or, as one may just as well say, of *Philaster* in Juvenal) he was modestly assuming a tradition of this kind. When Eliot writes of the fire that refines Arnaut he is doing the same thing in a more striking, more allusive, more fragmentary modern way. And it is hard to think that any one who fails to turn the pages back and forth in some such manner can be serious about the profession of letters. Professionals who do not want to do so, who wish the past away or under-rate its pressure on the present, are not professionals in *letters* but in

something else. What the profession of letters requires is a new version of that blend of interests and assumptions that marked the bookman. Of course I do not mean a revival of their prose, or of their poses; their cranks and whims belong to their time and not ours. But a coexistence of interests in past and present, though now to be understood very differently, in the light of a new hermeneutic which is subtle enough to know its own impermanence—that needs reaffirming. And those who understand it will observe some family resemblance between themselves and—not Arnold Bennett entire, that would be absurd—but between themselves and some eager lamplit figure, unpacking his century of classics, opening the *Juvenal*, and remembering—with felicitous inaccuracy—those lines from *Philaster*.

Enrique Krauze

AN INTERVIEW WITH LESZEK KOLAKOWSKI

Following my interview with Leszek Kolakowski in his room at All Souls College, Sir Isaiah Berlin referred to an anecdote about the well-known Polish philosopher. Berlin had asked, "How are you?" To which Kolakowski replied, "Well, you see, England is an island in Europe; Oxford is an island in England, All Souls is an island in Oxford, and I am an island in All Souls."

He must have felt more isolated that winter. It was exactly a year since the Polish government had decided to crush Solidarity. Walesa was confined, and the intellectuals of Kor, who were Kolakowski's friends, lived clandestinely or were imprisoned. Once he himself had suffered persecution, but the end of the Polish spring must have been particularly painful. None of the earlier liberation uprisings in kidnapped Poland had given rise to such intense hopes.

This perhaps explains the somber tone of Kolakowski when I saw him. But the tone did not obscure the clarity and the sharp irony of his thought. He had just published his book Religion, and the conversation went through religious byways. But he did not talk about his books, The Keys of the Sky or his Conversations with the Devil. He talked of the night that brought about the Polish night.

EK: It is often said that Marxism is now, not unlike Christianity was in the Middle Ages, an intolerant and zealous faith, a multistate and a church. To what extent do you think these parallels are historically valid?

LK: I think the parallel is valid only to a limited extent. The differences are perhaps more important than the similarities. What I have in mind is, first of all, that Marxism in its Leninist ideological forms has always had a much larger ambition than the Church, however intolerant it might have been. The principle of the division between ecclesiastic and secular authorities has always been admitted in the Church, even though there were always disagreements in the Church about where exactly the line between the two ran. The principle itself, of course, was based

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on Jesus Christ's saying, "Render to Caesar . . ." whereas the communist power tries to monopolize all sides of human life. Such concentration of power has no precedent in history. It is supposed to be both a spiritual and secular power embracing all areas of life including economy, information systems, political relationships and ideology. To this extent, the analogy doesn't hold. Besides, however intolerant the Church might have been in various historical periods, its very existence was based on real faith in the doctrine. Communist faith did exist as a living faith in some historical periods, to be sure. But now it can be said safely that it has evaporated, at least in communist countries, so that it is now a power system without the substance of a living faith. The ideology is necessary to legitimize the power system, but neither the rulers nor the ruled any longer take it seriously in communist countries. This is then a second point where the analogy doesn't hold. The third is this: although communism, as long as it was a real and living faith, showed certain similarities to a religious creed and the Party had some similarities to a church, I would say it was rather a caricature of religion than a religion proper. Certainly, it functioned in minds in a way similar to a religious faith; it provided a kind of invulnerable system of thinking which no facts and no knowledge might have shattered or destroyed; it was immune to facts, to history, to reality. But, at the same time it made claims to 'scientific knowledge.' In this sense the analogy has a limited value.

EK: You have had different views on the place of utopia in society. What are your views now? Is it an inevitable idea? Is it a healthy idea? What is the historical balance sheet of utopia?

LK: As long as utopia is simply a vision of a perfect world, a world without suffering, without struggle and conflict, such a vision is a harmless literary exercise. A utopia becomes sinister once we persuade ourselves that we have a kind of technique to bring about our fantasies; that we acquire a technique of apocalypse, a device by which we can implement our dreams; then there is nothing that should not be sacrificed to this noble goal. Utopia implies an ultimate goal, however vaguely defined, and absolutely all methods are good if we believe that they will bring about this goal. To the rulers of the communist countries this utopian fantasy gives a very convenient conceptual framework within which everything is allowed. There will be a perfect world of unity and happiness; it might come in a hundred years, perhaps in a thousand years, but

it is quite right to sacrifice all the present generations to this goal. Only in this sense does utopian thinking become malignant, because utopia is a device at the service of tyranny. Nevertheless, nobody can prevent us — and I don't believe it would be desirable — from thinking in terms of values which cannot be fully implemented. There is something natural in thinking of a better world. It is natural and it is indispensable. After all, not much could have been done in terms of progress if people had not thought of things which could not have been implemented in their time but which guided, so to say, their effort. In this sense utopia is perhaps a permanent component of human life. It becomes really dangerous when we start believing that we can institutionalize human fraternity, that we can by violence and bureaucratic decrees, as all the Marxists believe, introduce a society of perfect unity and happiness. But it is important to keep in mind the idea of human fraternity, however impracticable it might be.

EK: Do you think that the utopian element in Marx himself was, so to say, essential?

LK: It is absolutely essential.

EK: What about a strain of Jewish messianism? The mark of Moses Hess whom Marx used to scorn?

LK: Many people speculate on the Jewish element in Marx's utopia. Marx himself had no real Jewish upbringing; as you know, he was not interested in his Jewish origin, and he strongly disliked being reminded of it. There was even a kind of anti-Semitic strain in him. But apart from that, if there was an element which ties Marx's utopia with Jewish messianism, it was not the result of Marx's own Jewishness, but rather, as you just mentioned, a result of the inspiration he got from Hess in whom Judaic messianic tradition blended with Rousseauist fantasies.

EK: In an essay you once wrote on "taking ideas seriously," you said one should not ask who is guilty and who is not, but instead what were the elements in Marxism — its ambiguities and conflicts — which led as it did to its development. It is an enormously broad question, I understand. Let me put it in the usual way: how does it relate to Leninism and Stalinism?

LK: It is perfectly true that Marx never imagined communism or socialism as a kind of concentration camp. Quite the contrary. Nevertheless there is a kind of ideological logic which is independent of the conscious intentions of the writer, philosopher, or prophet, and which we can follow in historical development. And

indeed, I think that Leninist version, the despotic totalitarian version of socialism, was not essentially a distortion of Marxism. I think it was a well-substantiated variant of Marxism, and there were other variants as well. This continuity can be seen in the fact that Marx really did believe in the perfect community of the future in which the entire realm of production and distribution will be taken over by the state. In other words, it was supposed to be state socialism. After all, it was Marx and not Stalin who said that the entire idea of communism can be summarized in one single phrase: abolition of private property. If so, there are no reasons to claim that totalitarian, despotic communism of the Soviet type is not communism in the sense of Marx because private property has been abolished. Now, Marx took from the Saint-Simonians the slogan that in the future there will be no government over the people but only administration of things. But he failed somehow to ask how things can be administered without people being used in the process. Eventually his entire project of a perfect society was the centralization of all means of production and distribution in the hands of the state: universal nationalization. Now, to nationalize everything means to nationalize people; it is a blueprint for slavery. And we did not need to wait for the Bolshevik Revolution to make this discovery because during Marx's lifetime many people—especially the anarchists—pointed out quite clearly that the Marxian kind of socialism, state socialism, is an announcement of a new tyranny much worse than those in existence. It was noted already by Proudhon in his critique of Marx, that communism means in fact state ownership of human beings. It was Bakunin who predicted that socialism à la Marx would lead to the despotic rule of upstarts from the working class who will replace the present tyrants and the existing tyranny with another even worse. It was the American anarchist, Benjamin Tucker, who made the remark that Marxism knows only one medicine for all monopolies: a single monopoly. It was a Polish anarchist, Edward Abramovski, who predicted that if by chance communists manage to seize power by a kind of revolutionary providence in a society which is not morally prepared for it, it would inevitably result in a society strongly divided into hostile classes of the privileged oppressors and exploited masses. All this had been noted in the nineteenth century, which proves that it is not the case that Sovietism has nothing to do with Marxist ideology. I'm not saying, of course,

that the historical cause of Sovietism is Marxist ideology. Obviously the Soviet Revolution resulted from an unpredictable coincidence of many historical accidents. The point is only that Marxism did not need to be fundamentally distorted in order to serve as a self-glorifying device for a privileged class of oppressors and exploiters ruling the Soviet type societies.

EK: But still, it is surprising to read in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* those famous remarks against the state, where he calls it something like a “horrendous parasitical organism” swallowing society. I suppose it’s only natural that Marx had contradictions. In many of his writings there is a deep libertarian strain. . . .

LK: Of course. After all, Marx was not the founder of Marxism-Leninism. Marx’s writings spanned several decades, and obviously there are many hesitations, ambiguities, loose ends and contradictions. We can find many things in his writings which ran counter to Marxist-Leninist interpretations. And, after all, Marxism-Leninism is nothing more than Stalin’s doctrine. Nevertheless there was a basic utopian idea through all of Marx’s development, that could well be used for the purpose that it now serves. And it did not need—as I said—to be fundamentally distorted. We can take almost any problem among those that kept him busy and find hesitations and contradictions: the national problem, the role of the state, the concept of revolution.

EK: While in the East Marxism is little more than a vestige of ideology, in the West we still see it, if not flourishing, at least well and alive. How do you explain the psychological roots of this permanence or resilience?

LK: I think it is rather simple. After all, Marxism, as used for ideological purposes, is extremely easy. You can learn it quickly, and you have ready-made solutions. You know everything about history without ever learning history; you have the key which unlocks all the doors and you have an easy blueprint for dealing with all problems of the world and one simple solution for all of them. As Jean-Paul Sartre once said: Marxists are lazy; indeed, they don’t want to be bothered with complications of history, with problems of demography or biology, they want only the satisfaction of being possessors of an ultimate truth. There is nothing astonishing in that so many people like to have such a solution.

EK: But if one looks at the long list of Kronstadts in the twentieth century, there is indeed something astonishing about that.

LK: Well, in ideological thinking facts cannot damage faith. It is like the millenarian movements. They calculate on which day the Last Judgment will take place, or when there will be a Second Coming. If the day comes and the prophecy does not materialize, they bitterly admit that they made some miscalculation in their predictions, that there was something wrong in the calculations, but their faith is not shaken. Soon they make another “foolproof” calculation. The same happens with Marxism. Once you have this ideological certainty nothing can shatter it: all right, everybody will recognize some errors were committed—they might have massacred fifty million people—but the *principle* is sound and good. Once you believe that, nothing can shatter your faith. This, I think, is a normal attitude of true believers.

EK: In Central America you can find a blend of three kinds of beliefs: nationalism; a vague sort of creole Marxism; and a theology of liberation, Christ for the poor, the real Christ. Aside from this blend, there is also a certain cult of violence stemming from a deep social and historical resentment. Is there some historical precedent for this zealous marriage of force and faith?

LK: It is an old story. The so-called theology of liberation has antecedents in history. Many popular heresies in the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century tried to use the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus Christ as a blueprint for a social gospel and for a perfect equality on earth. Nevertheless, many of these sects were reluctant to use violence. The revolutionary anabaptists of the early sixteenth century were perhaps the paradigmatic case of this kind of “theology of liberation,” that preaches violence as a legitimate means to implement Jesus Christ’s teaching. This led to a kind of short-lived grotesque pseudo-Christian tyranny in Münster in the sixteenth century. I am convinced that it is a fundamental distortion of the teaching of Jesus Christ. In various passages he condemned tyrants and rich people. But he never preached a specific kind of social order. He condemned some people for moral reasons as individuals, he condemned those who are indifferent to the misery of their neighbors, the wicked, but he never suggested he had a blueprint for a perfect society. In fact, the opposite is the case. The entire teaching of Jesus Christ can be understood only within his belief in the imminent Parusia; it was developed in the shadow of the apocalypse. All the earthly values become meaningless in the face of this coming event. And indeed, Christianity is not recognizably itself any longer if this side of

Jesus Christ is forgotten, namely: that the earthly values can never be absolute. However strongly one might condemn the greedy, the exploiters, the cruel—and of course, this is quite in keeping with the Christian teaching—this condemnation never leads to an idea of a perfect society or fraternity which might be established by violence.

EK: Let us suppose there is a place where people agree with this theological and zealous blend that I mentioned. As in “the grand inquisitor,” they simply renounce their liberty for the sake of those other beliefs and for the promise of bread and equality. What can you say about it?

LK: It is quite conceivable that a revolution which probably will lead, ultimately, to a totalitarian regime is, at one stage or another, supported by a majority, or at least by a very substantial minority. What can we say about it? Well, we should stress that the values we cherish as fundamental for European civilizations include not only the principle of majority rule but the principle of human rights. There are rights—and this is an important element in our tradition—that are invested in individuals only and which no majority is entitled to abrogate. If not, it would be in keeping with the principle of democracy that fifty-one percent of the population massacre the other forty-nine percent for any reason. If we think that the verdict of the majority alone counts, then we should support anything which the majority might decide to do whether in Iran or in Hitler’s Germany. But the political and social values of the European tradition would be void and meaningless if the principle of majority rule were not limited by the principle of human rights.

EK: On the one hand you acknowledge that the Soviet system is a historical novelty: an all-powerful system that has wiped out civil society, a state that embodies everything: legislates, judges, executes. On the other hand, you have also said it is a system which is disintegrating out of lack of self-correcting mechanisms. How do you reconcile these two views?

LK: I don’t see a contradiction. If I said it is something historically new—and I think it is—it is not new in all respects. Many people have pointed out some antecedents of Sovietism in Russian history. But I am not going to dwell on that subject. Certainly this system has historical roots, and it is a kind of return to barbarity, a reversal of the process of Westernization which Russia underwent, especially from the 1860s until the First World War. After

all, it was already in the eighteenth century that slavery was officially abolished in Russia. In the 1860s serfdom was abolished. Bolshevism restored both under different names. Nevertheless, in Russian history there have always been various conflicting currents, and the victory of Bolshevism can be seen as an anti-Western reaction. However, it is a society which curiously mixes up unity with disintegration. The society is unified in the sense that there is one center of power in all areas of life, one center which is supposed to have the monopolistic right to make all judgements and make all decisions; at the same time society is in a state of disintegration because civil society has been almost utterly destroyed. No forms of social organization, no crystallizations of social life are possible unless ordered by the state, so that each individual faces the omnipotent state as a separate and helpless person, and the state does everything to encourage this disintegration. People are supposed to live in a perfect unity as expressed by the leaders; at the same time they are supposed to hate each other in real life: they are encouraged to spy upon and denounce each other. Their unity can be realized only in form of a despotic state apparatus. Otherwise, all forms of social life are destined to destruction. To be sure, this destruction has never been absolutely carried out. Perhaps in Maoist China it went even further than in the Soviet Union: a great effort was made to destroy the family. The family is a kind of social structure which resists state ownership; in China they perceived that and tried to destroy it. They did it in Russia as well, but less consistently. This system is much less self-confident now than it used to be; its totalitarian principle doesn't work as efficiently as in Stalin's days. Nevertheless, its natural tendency is still the same: to destroy all forms of social life which are not imposed by the state.

EK: But what are the potential sources or sparks of resistance? Religion, family, national identities, humor perhaps?

LK: Well, these sources of resistance vary from one country to another. In Poland, as you know, national and religious identity are working very strongly against totalitarian power. In Soviet Russia there are many factors contributing to the decomposition of totalitarian power which seems to be intact and omnipotent, but in fact is not. The system is torn asunder by social, economic, and cultural contradictions and conflicts with which it cannot cope. It can only prevent the conflicts from being openly expressed but cannot remove the sources. It is likely that these sources of conflict will

be increasing. The system is of course extremely inefficient economically; it is in a permanent state of crisis, and it lacks self-regulating mechanisms. It improves itself only under the impact of catastrophes. The tensions of national character will certainly be increasing, and perhaps it is even the most powerful factor contributing to the disintegration of the Soviet system. I am not happy about it; I am not saying that this is a good thing, quite the contrary. But it is a fact that national tensions, hatreds and feelings are the most powerful element in the erosion of Sovietism. So I am far from believing that the system is invulnerable or that it will last forever. I think its decomposition has started and will go on.

EK: Does the West understand this?

LK: I don't think so. I think it is rather normal, and not exceptional in the mind of Western politicians, to think in short terms. Of course, nobody wants war, neither do the Soviets. Everyone knows that a global war would be an unspeakable horror and disaster for everybody. Nevertheless, because in the present situation the greatest single source of danger of a global war is Soviet imperialism, it is in the interest of Western civilization and in the interest of European countries to think in terms of a long-term strategy: how can the West contribute to a gradual and nonexplosive disintegration of totalitarian institutions in the Soviet Union, and thus diminish the danger of global war? This kind of strategic thinking is lacking in the West.

EK: Is the deterrent policy short-sighted too?

LK: Not at all. The West has no other option but to build deterrent devices. I have no military expertise whatsoever, but in political terms it is quite obvious that there is no other choice.

EK: Not so obvious, perhaps.

LK: Well, of course, there are many people who believe that they can contribute to world peace by disarming the West unilaterally. The idiocy of this reasoning is almost inconceivable. But I would say there is an unpleasant and deliberate ambiguity in the pacifist movements in the West. To the danger posed by Soviet imperialism there are, among pacifists, three attitudes; they can be summed up in the following way: this is an awful system, an imperialist system that is ready to provoke war if needed, but because war would be terribly destructive, it is better for us to accept that we'll be Soviet slaves; we should accept it rather than fight. Now, this is a consistent attitude, but it should be clearly formulated. If they actually say it, all right, then I have no argument against that.

There is another attitude roughly like that: oh, that might be an awful system but they are peaceful people, they don't want war, they will never attack us, there is no point in building such terrible deterrent devices because it harms everybody. We are safe. This supposition is too rarely formulated clearly. But if people do say so, then unlike the previous case, we can reasonably discuss and show that it is not true, that the Soviet system has a built-in imperialistic tendency which has been confirmed in uncountable instances in recent history; this can be shown. The third attitude is that of those who think it is the best social system ever devised on earth and it would be splendid to have it here. These three attitudes are incompatible with each other, and I wish only that each of them was clearly stated, whereas many pacifists somehow mix the three without stating any of them clearly. This would be my main appeal to those pacifists: they should choose between the three attitudes, and they shouldn't mix up these incompatible ideas.

I would add this: In the eyes of the Soviet leaders, Western people who are politically active fall into three categories: first, enemies who are hated but respected as long as they are strong and consistent; second, reliable agents; and third, useful idiots. This latter category consists of people who are flattered and kissed if they appear in Moscow, but they are in fact treated with utter contempt by the Soviet leaders . . . and rightly so, I would say.

EK: You have lived in Britain for thirteen years, I understand, and you have visited the United States several times. Do you still think there is a sort of spiritual recession as you thought while witnessing the student movements of 1968? Do you think that the West is in some ways crippled?

LK: No. I don't think so. Of course, if we look at the history of the last two decades there are ups and downs; there are moments of spiritual disarray and moments of awakening or sobering; this is probably inevitable. Nevertheless, I think the Western civilization has as an essential component its ability of self-criticism. Without this ability there would be no reason to keep this civilization alive. It is inevitable that this self-criticism sometimes takes a masochistic or suicidal character. But I am far from believing that the West is doomed or that Western civilization has come to an end; I think that the West has moral, spiritual and economic resources strong enough to resist the encroachment of barbarism.

EK: So in this sense you part ways with Solzhenitsyn?

LK: Solzhenitsyn, much as I admire him as a writer, as a great witness of our century, seems unable to realize that there is no freedom without some social cost. To have freedom is always costly in social and moral terms. We have no choice between Western society as it is today and a society where there would be freedom and no pornography, no possibility of spreading harmful, dangerous or absurd ideas; these are necessary costs of freedom. On the other hand, he is right in pointing out the lack of moral preparedness of the West. But as I said, it seems to me there are no reasons to fall in despair about it, because this civilization proved to be resilient on many occasions when it seemed that it was already doomed. If we had lived in the sixteenth century, we could have believed that the Ottoman Empire would very soon dominate Europe. This didn't happen.

EK: A ghost haunts the Kremlin nights and this conversation: Poland. There are voices who speak of the possibility of a "kadarization" of Poland under Jaruzelski, the taming—so to say—of Solidarity. What are the scenarios that you foresee in the near future? Is there still a chance of a transformation from below?

LK: I don't believe at all in this "kadarization" idea. It will not work in Poland for several reasons. After all, the quite relative success of the Hungarian economic experiment followed several years of very severe and cruel repression. Many years have elapsed between 1956 and the beginning of this economic experiment. Jaruzelski will not have those years. Secondly, Hungary after the 1956 revolution has never been in the state of economic catastrophe as is Poland today. The Soviet Union, in the face of that situation, could and in fact did help Hungary economically after 1956. It is unable to do this now for Poland, both because it is a much larger country and because the Soviet Union itself is in terrible economic trouble. It will rather exploit poor Poland, as it is now, than help it. And thirdly, the relative success of the Hungarian reforms in the last years is based, psychologically, on despair, on the fact that the rulers succeeded in convincing the people that they should not think of any political changes, that the status of Hungary as a Soviet colony cannot be changed, that it will be so forever. So people should abandon all political thinking and concentrate instead on daily life and possible economic improvement. This state of despair is unlikely to be implemented in Poland. The situation now is that of a stalemate. The government is unable either to crush the underground resistance or to deliver

goods it would like to deliver to ease the social discontent. The Solidarity movement, on the other hand, has no strength or means to change the situation radically. So there is a kind of impasse. Nevertheless, it is not a stable impasse. It is not likely that this situation will last for very long, because the tensions are strong, and the hatred accumulated by the military dictatorship after the crushing of Solidarity is unlikely to abate. No radical solutions have been worked out either by the government or by Solidarity. The government takes some steps in order to appease the population, but it cannot, of course, appease both the population and the Kremlin. Therefore, it inconsistently uses threats and repressions on the one hand, and takes appeasement steps on the other. *None of them is sufficiently consistent either to intimidate the society or to appease it.* It is therefore likely that we will be witnesses of new struggles in the coming years. As to the outcome, we can only speculate upon it.

EK: Isaiah Berlin distinguishes between hedgehogs and foxes. The hedgehogs—the ideological thinkers—usually avoid empirical truth with all its diversity and paradoxes. The foxes are not afraid to lose themselves in plurality. Why can't the hedgehog be more like a fox?

LK: I think none of us can be totally satisfied with the restrictions imposed by empiricism. We are all committed to values which transcend empirical inquiry. We all have hopes and ideas which we are unable to substantiate properly within the framework of empiricism. Without that, life probably would be unbearable. It is natural, and there is nothing wrong in that we have hopes, faiths and commitments. What is wrong is to be led by commitments into wishful thinking and to replace what can be empirically known by ideological images. We should only make a distinction between what is and what is not empirically provable and never renounce the use of rational argument and of empirical proofs in the areas where they are applicable.

EK: Give to reason what belongs to reason, and to faith. . . . It reminds me of. . . .

LK: Yes: Pascal.

Dennis Wrong

MYTHS OF ALIENATION

The concept of alienation is less salient in contemporary discourse than it was some years ago, largely as a result of its excessive use in the 1950s and 1960s. In part, it has acquired a taken-for-granted character as shorthand for the mood of distemper, cynicism, and distrust believed to prevail in contemporary life and society; in part, synonyms or near-synonyms, such as "legitimation crisis," have taken on much of the rhetorical and ideological work performed in the past by "alienation." The term became too vague and shapeless, coming to serve as a sort of verbal talisman connoting just about any state of psychological discomfort or malaise. Yet its very popularity depended on its suggestion of something more than mere personal discontent, which is, after all, a pretty commonplace condition. "Alienation" was meant to convey either a sense of metaphysical melancholy about the human condition or a sociopolitical diagnosis of and protest against the failures and limitations of the social order.

The latter emphasis was paramount in the 1960s when the term was fashionable among social scientists, political intellectuals, and radical youth. To assert one's alienation became a badge of honor, a credential attesting to superior moral sensitivity—in short, something to boast of rather than to complain about. This has never been true of such strictly subjective or psychological states as "unhappiness," not even as expressed in the more sophisticated synonyms for them favored by the educated like "frustration," "depression," "anxiety," or "neurosis." When alienation was imputed to or reportedly observed among ordinary citizens, supposedly exemplifying their attitude to politics or capitalism or American life in general, the implication was usually intended that these collective entities rather than the alienated individuals themselves were responsible for their condition. Thus even in its most clichéd uses the term was never quite reduced to individual psychology but retained a latent sociological and even political meaning.

I have no wish to survey once more the uses and abuses of the concept, nor to explore its origins in Christian theology, nor its venerable practical meanings, free of wider philosophical or sociological significance, in jurisprudence and early psychiatry. Nor do I

want to review yet again the concept's intellectual history in Hegelian philosophy and Marxism: the complex conceptual links among alienation, objectification, estrangement, and reification—*Entäusserung*, *Entfremdung*, *Verdinglichung*, et al—in the German romantic and idealist traditions. Neither am I concerned to offer another account of the specifically sociological adaptations of the concept, its differences from and frequent erroneous equation with anomie, let alone the various efforts to convert it into an empirically testable and even “measurable” phenomenon. All of these things have been done before quite adequately by competent and intelligent scholars.

It should be noted, however, that “alienation” was already a commonplace as long ago as the 1930s among the left-wing literary intellectuals associated with *Partisan Review*. Its ubiquitous use in these circles long antedated its postwar appropriation by existentialists, sociologists, and “humanist” Marxists. Yet this early history is invariably ignored by academic commentators and chroniclers, as in Walter Kaufman's assertion in his introduction to Richard Schacht's book, *Alienation*, that “in the fifties a few refugees from Germany and Austria naturalized ‘alienation’ in the United States.” (He specifically mentioned Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, Erich Kahler, and Hannah Arendt.) Yet in the anthology of the first ten years of *Partisan Review* published in 1946, the single selection reprinted from the journal's first two years, when it was affiliated with the Communist Party, was an exposition of the concept of alienation in Marx's *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts* entitled “The Philosophic Thought of the Young Marx.” This article originally appeared in 1936, a mere four years after the first publication of the famous Paris Manuscripts in Moscow. So at least one influential group of American intellectuals was familiar with the young Marx's interest in the alienation concept barely a few years after the texts revealing this interest had become known and available.

I recall from my own experience that by the middle 1940s, if not earlier, the term had become very much an emblem or badge of identity for people in the orbit of *Partisan Review*, some of them even occasionally jesting about the extent to which this was the case. Clearly, alienation was already understood not merely as a painful affliction but as something of an honorific condition suggesting superior aesthetic sensibility and spiritual depth, long before it acquired these overtones when popularized two decades later. There was a widely-repeated tale, probably apocryphal, about a secretary at *The New Yorker* maliciously asking a secretary at *Partisan Review* if

their office typewriters had keys with whole words like “alienation” on them. A short story by Delmore Schwartz about a New Year’s Eve party in 1938 depicts a character unmistakably based on one of the editors of *Partisan Review* grumbling about too many strangers invited to the party, “There’s enough alienation in modern life without installing it in the living room.”

The *Partisan Review* intellectuals tended to use the concept primarily to describe the antagonistic relation between the creative artist or intellectual and the philistine majority. “Alienation” added a sociological and political flavor to this familiar late romantic complaint by identifying modern society with its *bourgeois* character, with its dominant institution of private property and the resulting “alienated labor” of proletarian wage-workers. The term indeed encapsulated neatly the two governing themes that gave *Partisan Review* its distinctiveness: its dual commitment to Marxism in politics and to modernism in the arts. Both commitments became redefined in the years following the journal’s initial rupture with the Communist Party; “alienation” was increasingly used to connote primarily a literary or aesthetic sensibility rather than a socio-economic condition (more akin to Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness” than to Marx’s economic grounding of the concept), a tendency that became even more pronounced after the war, when the general inhospitality to art ascribed to “bourgeois society” became more specifically identified with the commercially produced and distributed “mass culture” made possible by new communications media. By this time, the term was used with a certain ironic jocularly by the leading *Partisan Review* writers, faintly mocking both the cultural and politically radical pretensions it suggested.

The importance of the concepts of alienation and mass culture to the New York intellectuals owed little or nothing to Lukács or the Frankfurt School or to European existentialist thinkers (except perhaps for Ortega), although obviously the convergences among them resulted from their drawing on a partially shared political and cultural heritage. The convergence with existentialism undoubtedly accounts for the fact that the ideas of its leading exponents were first introduced to an American public in the pages of *Partisan Review*. But this was after the war, at a time when “alienation” had long been a key concept typifying the journal’s aesthetic-political outlook.

Anyone is free to define alienation as he or she pleases. But there is one prevailing conception of it that, divested of much of the

intellectual baggage the term has inevitably accumulated over the years, accentuates elements that were central to the German philosophical tradition out of which the concept came. As Peter Berger defines it in *The Sacred Canopy*: "Alienation is the process whereby the dialectical relationship between the individual and his world is lost to consciousness. The individual 'forgets' that this world was and continues to be co-produced by him. . . . The essential difference between the socio-cultural world and the world of nature is obscured — namely, the difference that men have made the first but not the second."

In another book, coauthored with Thomas Luckmann (*The Social Construction of Reality*), Berger offered a definition of "reification" that is almost identical word-for-word with the definition of alienation I have quoted. Lukács is the source of the conception of reification as a form of social consciousness, although he did not, as is sometimes ignorantly alleged, invent the term. It had long signified — and is still so defined in English-language dictionaries — the mental habit of treating abstract concepts as possessing a substantial or "thing-like" existence in the external world. Alfred North Whitehead labeled this practice "the fallacy of misplaced concreteness," and his vivid phrase was invoked by Talcott Parsons against the utilitarians in *The Structure of Social Action*.

Lukács's achievement was to give reification a much wider collective meaning, connoting the perception by most people most of the time, particularly social classes, of the social and political world as fixed, unalterable and external to their lived experience. Lukács, in effect, rediscovered a central aspect of the Hegelian idea of alienation and recognized that it was implicit in some of Marx's later writings, despite Lukács's own inevitable ignorance of the as yet unpublished Paris Manuscripts.

Whether one calls it alienation or reification, this conception differs from the conventional usages of American sociologists in which, as Richard Schacht remarks in *Alienation*, his thorough survey of the proliferating meanings of the concept, ". . . alienation is conceived mostly in terms of the presence of certain attitudes and feelings. . . . Thus there is no question of alienated individuals who are not aware of their alienation." Berger strenuously objects to what he calls the "psychologization" of the concept, but his own version which, following Lukács, he explicitly links to the notion of "false consciousness," is psychological in referring to cognition even if it ex-

cludes feelings and attitudes. To be sure, it is the *absence* rather than the presence of something in a person's awareness or consciousness that is central to Berger's and Lukács's conception.

Although Berger, with alienation especially in mind, has argued that "the integration of some Marxian concepts into sociological theory [is] very important," he concedes that his own "use of the concept has 'right' rather than 'left' implications." This no doubt accounts for his readiness to divest it of any affective overtones which would endow it with negative or critical implications. Berger's conservatism is evident in his insistence that alienation and reification reflect mankind's universal, even sociobiological, need for order or *nomos*, a view that correctly sees alienation and anomie as opposites rather than treating them as virtual equivalents like most sociologists. But one need not follow Berger in regarding alienation as a necessary bulwark against anomie, nor, for that matter, Lukács in seeing it as an obstacle to be overcome by a new world-transforming historical subject.

Nor should one minimize, let alone reject outright, the implication that alienation is an unpleasant, frustrating, and even painful emotional condition, even if it is impermissibly loose to equate it with any and all unpleasant, frustrating and painful emotional conditions. Alienation as "estrangement" (*Entfremdung*), which clearly implies a sense of loss or deprivation, goes back at least to Hegel. Moreover, the notion of "self-alienation," which unmistakably suggests an undesirable subjective state, was employed by both Hegel and Marx.

Suffice it to say that alienation has always suggested *both* a cognitive and an affective relation to the world, which is indeed why it has lent itself to such facile and indiscriminate popularization.

My major purpose is to argue that the essentially cognitive definition favored by Berger stands in an apparently paradoxical relation to the more diffuse psychological and political resonances that inescapably cling to the concept. Put differently, I want to suggest that there is a contradiction between the Lukács-Berger conception of alienation as reified consciousness and the more common, equally venerable view that identifies alienation with estrangement, with a subjective feeling of loneliness and homelessness in the world.

The affinity between alienation as a failure to recognize that the social and historical world is a collective human creation and the political outlook of the left, grounded in the original ethos of the Enlightenment, is obvious enough. That "men make their own history"

is at the heart of the left's worldview: men can therefore overcome the historically given, the burden of the past, and recreate the social world in the image of secular ideals validated by rational moral and political principles. It follows that the most alienated people of all are primitive men who do not sharply separate the natural from the cultural in seeing both as pervasively shaped by magical and animistic forces. Characterizations of primitive societies as changeless or "historyless," as "cold" social formations in contrast to the more incoherent and internally contradictory "hot" societies immersed in "historicity," or in an ineluctable historical consciousness, are consistent with this view. One of the clearest and least philosophically pretentious formulations of the difference is that of the anthropologist Robert Redfield, who maintains that the absence of the idea of *reform*, of deliberate attempts to alter received customs and institutions, is the crucial dividing line between primitive—he calls them "precivilized"—societies and civilizations.

Redfield goes on to observe that the conscious reform of their institutions is exceedingly rare even in civilized societies, noting its infrequency until "quite modern times" in both Western and Chinese history. Belief in the divine origin and legitimation of the social order obviously inhibits purposeful efforts to change it. Ludwig Feuerbach regarded religion as the prototype of alienation: the projection of human qualities onto imaginary beings who were then regarded as independent, external powers to whom man must abase himself. The overcoming of alienation required the rejection of religious beliefs and authorities in the name of a secular materialistic humanism.

The young Marx extended the idea of alienation to the state and the economy, ultimately concluding that economic alienation was the foundation of both religious and political alienation. Alienation as a form of consciousness was dissolved into the social reality of subjection to capitalism and the class domination it imposed. Anxious to repudiate the abstract and mentalistic overtones of the Hegelian and Feuerbachian conceptions, Marx, not surprisingly, virtually abandoned the term in his later works in which the exploitation and eventual revolt of the working class became the major themes. Some sociologists who have revived the concept have echoed this in making alienation synonymous with "powerlessness," although, in contrast to Lukács and Berger, awareness of being powerless is central to their definition. It seems, incidentally, quite superfluous to equate alienation with a sense of subordination, oppression or vic-

timization when we have so many other less metaphysically loaded words to describe this condition.

What are the features of modern societies that are regarded as alienating and themselves the products of alienation? One could hardly hope to offer an exhaustive list, but the following surely include the major candidates: the division of labor, the rule of the bourgeoisie, capitalism, the market, private property, the big city, bureaucracy, the centralized state, mass society, commercialized popular culture, the impersonal norms of science and technology, the machine, domination by “technocrats” animated by “instrumental rationality”—I don’t think I have left anything important out.

Most people are indeed often overawed by and feel estranged from the massive “facticity” of these ubiquitous social realities. But do they really regard them as forces that are not manmade, as something more—or less—than human products and creations? Might not the very opposite be the truth, namely, that it is precisely the accurate perception of their manmade nature that accounts for their power to alienate? If so, perhaps the causes of alienation as estrangement lie not in alienation as reification, nor in Durkheim’s basically dissimilar notion of anomie, but in what Max Weber described, and meant quite literally, in the phrase he borrowed from Schiller, as “the disenchantment of the world.”

But before exploring further this possibility, an enormously influential apparent exception to it, the paradigmatic example of alienation itself to Marxists, must be considered. The case of the market, more specifically of commodity production for the market, seemingly contradicts the suggestion that all of the alienating social phenomena listed above are generally perceived as human products. Marx’s famous passage in *Capital* on “commodity fetishism,” as has often been noted, echoes his youthful theorizing about alienation, although he does not reiterate the term itself. Lukács singled out this passage as describing the source and prime exemplar of reification, which in generalized form became the central concept in the intellectual tradition of post-Lukácsian Western Marxism, including especially the Frankfurt critical theorists.

Marx wrote that commodity production, that is, the production of objects in order to sell them, creates a situation in which the “social relation” between producers is indirect and takes the form of a relation between their material products that compete for sale on the market. “There it is,” he goes on to observe in a much-quoted passage, “a definite social relation between men, that assumes in their

eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things." He then alludes to the Feuerbachian theory of religion in referring to "the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world [where] the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life." "So it is," he concludes, "in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands."

But Marx has given us no more than a highly-colored description of the market where, at least in large-scale societies, the producers do not directly interact but influence each other only indirectly through the results of the exchange of their products mediated by money (and often enough by middlemen). Where is there any fantasy or mystification in this familiar circumstance? Marx, to be sure, did not like the market nor money as the medium that made its scope and impersonality possible, expressing his socialist preference for "production by freely associated men . . . consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan." No less than Durkheim or Parsons, Marx was a partisan of consensus, solidarity, and social integration over conflict, separation, and system integration (the latter connoting the mediated, indirect and nonconsensual interdependence of men in society). He differed from them in thinking that capitalism, commodity production, money, and ultimately the division of labor itself were insuperable obstacles to the attainment of an ideal unity of mankind.

More specifically, Marx contended that the price or "exchange-value" of a commodity is perceived as an inherent property of the physical object exchanged rather than as a social meaning reflecting an actual social relation under capitalist conditions of production and exchange. But he provides no real evidence that this is so: the purported resemblances to primitive fetishism or to Feuerbach's deified projections of the human mind are at best no more than analogies. I am reminded of the old tale that children growing up in big cities — children, note, not adults — believe that milk is somehow produced by the milkman who bottles and delivers it. Marx, to be sure, ends the famous chapter with quotations from several second-rate and now forgotten economists who weirdly claimed that "value" (meaning exchange-value) was an actual property of things in contrast to their use-values which are relative to human purposes. But this is simply an instance of the reification of abstract concepts in the pre-Lukácsian or Whiteheadian sense; there is no reason to believe that the ordinary citizen, equipped only with common sense, saw things that way any more than he or she thought milk came "natu-

rally" in bottles rather than from cows. Marx's argument reveals his own quintessential bourgeois scholasticism. A little bit of the "positivistic" survey research of American sociologists so reviled by philosophical Western Marxists might help resolve the question of the reality of commodity fetishism.

Marx's major intellectual achievement was his insistence that the principles of classical political economy had to be firmly located in their particular historical and social context, as opposed to the claims of the early economists that they were timeless natural laws comparable to, indeed reflecting and partly modeled after, Newtonian mechanics or Darwinian natural selection. The core of Marx's Marxism was his assertion of the dependence of the laws of the market on capitalist economic institutions that are historical creations capable of being transformed as a result of their own operation which prepares the ground for eventual social revolution. The connection with the older philosophical idea of alienation lies in the rejection of the assimilation of the workings of capitalism to immutable natural forces analogous to the omnipotent deities of religion in their independence from and control over human aims and actions. Here is the rationale for the more generalized attack by critical theorists on the assumption that the sociocultural world is governed by laws of a deterministic "nature-like" character, the grounds for their ceaseless polemics against "positivism" and "objectivism" in social thought, which they manage to find almost everywhere, including in Marx himself as well as in various later versions of Marxism.

Let us recall the modern social phenomena held chiefly responsible for alienation: capitalism, bureaucracy, technology. Does anyone today really consider these to be reflections of unalterable natural laws of the same order as the motions of the planets or the evolution of new species? Just as nobody deifies them, I doubt that many people see them as anything but manmade, "socially constructed" entities. Even contemporary economists for whom the workings of the market remain the major organizing principle or master paradigm of their discipline no longer reify their concepts in the manner of the classical economists criticized by Marx. Modern economists regard the "market mechanism" and *homo economicus* himself as conceptual constructs or models that lend themselves to econometric manipulations permitting wide and varied inferences, but not as realistic descriptions of the world. The professional economist's "equilibrium price-auction model," as Lester Thurow names it in his recent assault upon it, certainly remains open to

criticism. But such criticism is necessarily what Ernest Gellner has called "second-order" criticism addressed to the model's artificiality and remoteness from the real world, its seductive adaptability to mathematization notwithstanding, rather than criticism that indicts the builders and users of the model for naively believing that they are describing the world. Thus commodity fetishism as alienation does not apply any longer even to the abstract thought processes of economists.

Marx believed that political economy was becoming the "dominant ideology" of emerging bourgeois societies. He was mistaken, for neither classical economics nor the social Darwinism increasingly popular during his own most active years ever fully achieved that status, not even for the bourgeoisie itself. Nor did sociology, for which Comte and even Durkheim more than a generation later had such high hopes, achieve such status, although Marxism itself became a coercively imposed dominant ideology for those non-bourgeois societies that trace their legitimation back to the October Revolution of 1917. Contemporary sociologists, however, remain curiously blind to the extent to which the leading assumptions of their discipline have entered into the popular consciousness over the past fifty years.

Raymond Aron has written: "To our customs and beliefs, the very ones we hold sacred, sociology ruthlessly attaches the adjective 'arbitrary'." He quotes an acute observation by Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's nephew from the generation of sociologists between Aron's own and Durkheim's, to the effect that "all social phenomena are, to some degree, the work of a collective will, and whoever says human will, says choice between different possible options."

These statements suggest that the view of the social order as arbitrary or optional presented by sociologists may itself be a source of estrangement from the social order. Not only does such a view disenchant the world by ridding it of humanized gods and spirits, but it also deprives it of the aura of iron necessity and inevitability associated with the reign of natural laws. Modern men like all men have been thrust into an external and constraining society that is not of their own making, but they are more acutely aware than earlier generations that this society was made by other men rather than by God or nature. It often appears to them, therefore, as a world of make-shift, historically accidental social arrangements in which they feel trapped precisely because they are so readily capable of imagining different and more attractive arrangements. The pathos of their sit-

uation is not so much that they reify the institutions and power structures impinging upon them, ascribing to them an existence and weight independent of human activity and choice, as that they are incapable of reifying them in seeing them rather as purely contingent human creations to which they are compelled to accommodate themselves. If alienation is the failure to remember the humanly produced and socially constructed nature of society, perhaps the very overcoming of such alienation is not the solution to but rather a cause of alienation as estrangement, homelessness, meaninglessness—the conception of it generally favored by existentialists and American sociologists as well as by modernist literary intellectuals before them.

One recalls incongruities in the outlook of the youthful political and “countercultural” protest movements of the 1960s that made alienation into a shibboleth. Marxist slogans were combined with American Indian headbands, the chanting of mantras, and events like the famous effort, or pretended effort, to “levitate” the Pentagon. It often seemed as if the desired alternative to commodity fetishism was the real original fetishism of tribal cults so looked down upon by Marx from the heights of his nineteenth-century progressivism. Primitive peoples, far from representing the epitome of an alienated or reified consciousness because of their failure to see their culture and institutions as manmade and reformable, were admired as exemplars of the lack of alienation for that very reason, for their allegedly deep feeling for the wholeness of the cosmos harmoniously embracing both nature and culture. No wonder alienation became a discredited cliché under the weight of so many contradictory meanings!

Except for the numbers of people involved and the publicity they received, little was new in the religiosity and neoprimitivism of the 1960s counterculture. Fifty years earlier, Max Weber had commented on “the need of some modern intellectuals to furnish their souls with, so to speak, guaranteed genuine antiques.” “They play,” he noted, “at decorating a sort of domestic chapel with small sacred images from all over the world, or they produce surrogates through all sorts of psychic experiences to which they ascribe the dignity of mystic holiness, which they peddle in the book market.” What was novel about the 1960s, though by no means entirely unprecedented, was that such attitudes were expressed under the auspices of the political left and often included the invocation of Marxist phrases like “demystification” when the very opposite, the “remystification”

or “re-enchantment” of a disenchanted world, appeared to be the real objective of the protesters.

Hannah Arendt is one recent thinker who understood that alienation as estrangement may for modern man result from his very awareness of living in an almost entirely manmade world rather than from the suppression of such awareness. “The modern age, with its growing world-alienation,” she wrote, “has led to a situation where man, wherever he goes, encounters only himself. All the processes of the earth and the universe have revealed themselves either as man-made or as potentially man-made.” Like the theorists of the Frankfurt School whose technophobia she shared, she assigned responsibility for this result to the triumphs of science and technology, which have “devoured . . . the solid objectivity of the given.”

As our major interpreter of totalitarianism, however, Arendt achieved a deeper understanding than the Frankfurt theorists. The leaders of totalitarian movements, she saw, had grasped that history could be “made” or “made over,” that “everything is possible” and that their collective will need acknowledge no limits in objectifying its utopian absolutes after the seizure of state power. For the followers, on the other hand, the totalitarian movement was a way of overcoming their alienation by remystifying the world and endowing it once again with quasi-religious or quasi-scientific meaning and solidity. The convergence of these two tendencies gave totalitarianism its peculiarly modern yet atavistic character as neither a reversion to past forms of despotism nor, as the Frankfurt theorists thought, as the culmination and inevitable end product of either monopoly capitalism or “the dialectic of the Enlightenment.” Arendt’s archaism, what one critic has called her “Hellenic nostalgia,” was a source of insights superior to those emanating from the soured and embittered futurism of the Frankfurt neo-Marxists.

Contemporary critical theorists and humanist Marxists have an obvious answer to the claim that alienation is not the result of a mystified or nature-like view of the historical world but stems rather from the unambiguous recognition that it is manmade. Their argument is that the very consciousness of the manmade, human-all-too-human nature of contemporary institutions and the routines they impose increases the sense of their oppressiveness and their dehumanizing effects so long as they are unmistakably not the creations of a unified collective will, of the “totalizations,” in Sartre’s phrase, of a genuine historical subject. Alienation is here identified with a powerlessness of which its victims are painfully conscious, as in the

definitions favored by some non-Marxist American sociologists. The way to overcome alienation is to forge a new political will, an authentic collective *praxis*, aimed at dereifying what exists and reconstructing the world anew in the image of left ideals. As Neil McInnes has remarked, "The Critical Theory of Society generalizes Marx's revolutionary dialectic into the assertion that, since there is nothing in our society but our activity and its ephemeral products, it is all totally plastic and liable to instant revolution at almost any moment we wish—if only we would wish."

"If only we would wish"—ah, there's the rub! We are not, after all, talking about Periclean Athens, a few thousand residents of Parisian *arrondissements*, or even the Red Belt surrounding Berlin in the 1920s, but of hundreds of millions of people of diverse origins and outlooks dependent for survival itself on a technically complex network of goods and services that is increasingly international and intercontinental in scope. Marx had the realism to specify a tangible historical agent in the proletariat. The proletariat failed to fulfill the mission he assigned to it, but a return to the Young Hegelian apotheosis of humanity itself as a fictive political actor makes even less sense today than in the early nineteenth century when there were plausible excuses for equating world history with European and Western history.

Alienation as estrangement may be regarded as a normal rather than a critical condition in the modern world so long as it does not extend to all of the primary groups and "intermediate associations" that make up the fabric of everyday life in all societies, and provided also that we use the term to refer unambiguously to a social relation distinguishable from "self-alienation" as an individual psychological malady. Richard Schacht and Robert C. Tucker are scholarly anatomists of alienation who have argued for the necessity of this distinction. Alienation as a social relation is an inevitable consequence of the disjunction between system integration and social integration: in less technical language, of the circumstance that we know our lives to be determined by distant, unknown or imperfectly understood persons, organizations and "social forces" on a scale that utterly surpasses our limited capacities for fellow-feeling, group and institutional identification, and personal responsibility. Redfield had in mind at least one major aspect of this disjunction in regarding the separation of the "technical order" from the "moral order" as a major feature of the emergence of civilized societies from contacts between

previously isolated, small and homogeneous primitive or “folk” societies.

The dissociation of system from social integration is greatest and most salient in modern industrial or postindustrial societies in which it has been relentlessly increasing since at least the sixteenth century. Alienation as reification, on the other hand, is concentrated in primitive and archaic societies and becomes progressively attenuated in the course of rationalization or modernization, a process that includes diffusion of the disenchanting knowledge of ourselves provided by the human sciences and the great modernist artists and thinkers. To a growing extent, this disenchantment includes the awareness that alienation as homelessness and estrangement is, if not the human condition, at least inescapably the modern condition.

POEMS

Derek Walcott

SAINT LUCIA'S FIRST COMMUNION

At dusk, on the verge of the asphalt's worn-out ribbon,
in white cotton frock, white stockings, a black child stands.
First her, then a small field like her. Ah, it's First Communion;
you can tell by the ribboned missals in their hands,

and the stiff plaits pinned with a white satin moth.
The pupa's accordian, still pumping out the myth
of ebony branches out of whose parted mouth
the wafer pods in belief without an 'if'.

So, all across Saint Lucia now thousands of innocents
are finished on church-steps, facing the sun's lens,
standing candle-straight between head-tilting parents,
before darkness comes on like their blinded saint's.

But, if it were possible, I'd pull up on the verge
of the fading asphalt, before its headlights lance
their eyes, and housing them in my hands,
lower the window a crack, and delicately urge

the last moth delicately in, and gear the dark car
high out of town, and let them out on some hill,
their pulsing wings undusted, and watch them in thousands stagger
heavenward before it came on: the prejudice, the evil.

NIGHT-FISHING

Line, ply for each word
with the home-sick toss
of a black pirogue anchored
in stuttering phosphorous.

The crabfishers' torches
keep the surf's crooked line
and a cloud's page scorches
with a smell of kerosene.

Thorny stars still halo
the sybil's black cry:
'Apothanein thelo
I am longing to die',

but line, live in the speech
the ignorant shallows use
and throw their leaping catch
down between black canoes.

Les Murray

MACHINE PORTRAITS WITH PENDANT SPACEMAN

For Valerie

The bulldozer stands short as a boot on its heel-high ripple soles;
it has toecapped stumps aside all day, scuffed earth and trampled
rocks
making a hobnailed scarp downstream of raw clay shoals.
Its work will hold water. The man who bounced high on the box
seat, exercising levers, would swear a full frontal orthodox
oath to that. First he shaved off the grizzled scrub
with that front end safety razor supplied by the school of hard knocks
then he knuckled down and ground his irons properly; they copped
many a harsh rub.
At knock-off time, spilling thunder, he surfaced like a sub.

o

Speaking of razors, the workshop amazes with its strop,
its elapsing leather drive belt angled to the slapstick flow
of fast work in the Chaplin age; tightened, it runs like syrup,

streams like a mill-sluice, fiddles like a glazed virtuoso.
With the straitlaced summary cut of Sam Brownes long ago
it is the last of the drawn lash and bullocking muscle
left in engineering. It's where the panther leaping, his swift shadow
and all such free images turned plastic. Here they dwindle, dense
with oil,
like a skein between tough factory hands, pulley and Diesel.

○

Shaking in slow low flight, with its span of many jets,
the combine seeder at nightfall swimming over flat land
is a style of machinery we'd imagined for the fictional planets:
in the high glassed cabin, above vapour-pencilling floodlights, a
hand,
gloved against the cold, hunts along the medium-wave band
for company of Earth voices; it crosses speech garble music—
the Brandenburg Conch the Who the Illyrian High Command—
as seed wheat in the hoppers shakes down, being laced into the thick
night-dampening plains soil, and the stars waver out and stick.

○

Flags and a taut fence discipline the mountain pasture
where giant upturned mushrooms gape mildly at the sky
catching otherworld pollen. Poppy-smooth or waffle-ironed, each
armature
distils wild and white sound. These, Earth's first antennae
tranquilly angled outwards, to a black, not a gold infinity,
swallow the millionfold numbers that print out as a risen
glorious Apollo. They speak control to satellites in high
bursts of algorithm. And some of them are tuned to win
answers to fair questions, viz. What is the Universe in?

○

How many metal-bra and trumpet-flaring film extravaganzas
underlie the progress of the space shuttle's Ground Transporter
Vehicle
across macadam-surfaced Florida? Atop oncreeping house-high
panzers,
towering drydock and ocean-liner decks, there perches a gridiron
football
field in gradual motion; it is the god-platform; it sustains the bridal

skyscraper of liquid Cool, and the rockets borrowed from the
Superman
and the bricked aeroplane of Bustout-and-return, all vertical,
conjoined and myth-huge, approaching the starred gantry where
human
lightning will crack, extend, and vanish upwards from this
caravan.

o

Gold-masked, the foetal warrior
unslipping on a flawless floor,
I backpack air; my life machine
breathes me head-Earthwards, speaks the Choctaw
of tech-talk that earths our discipline—

but the home world now seems outside-in;
I marvel that here background's so fore
and sheathe my arms in the unseen

a dream in images unrecalled
from any past takes me I soar
at the heart of fall on a drifting line

this is the nearest I have been
to oneness with the everted world
the unsinking leap the stone unfurled

o

In a derelict village picture show I will find a projector,
dust-matted, but with film in its drum magazines, and the lens
mysteriously clean. The film will be called *Insensate Violence*,
no plot, no characters, just shoot burn scream beg claw
bayonet trample brains—I will hit the reverse switch then, in
conscience

and the thing will run backwards, unlike its coeval the machinegun;
blood will unspill, fighters lift and surge apart; horror will be undone
and I will come out to a large town, bright parrots round the
saleyards pens

and my people's faces healed of a bitter sophistication.

o

The more I act, the stiller I become;
the less I'm lit, the more spellbound my crowd;
I accept all colours, and with a warming hum
I turn them white and hide them in a cloud.
To give long life is a power I'm allowed
by my servant, Death. I am what you can't sell
at the world's end — and if you're still beetle-browed
try some of my treasures: an adult bird in its shell
or a pink porker in his own gut, Fritz the Abstract Animal.

○

No riddles about a crane. This one drops a black clanger on cars
and the palm of its four-thumbed steel hand is a raptor of wrecked
tubing;
the ones up the highway hoist porridgy concrete, long spars
and the local skyline; whether raising aloft on a string
bizarre workaday angels, or letting down a rotating
man on a sphere, these machines are inclined to maintain
a peace like world war, in which we turn over everything
to provide unceasing victories. Now the fluent lines stop, and strain
engrosses this tower on the frontier of junk, this crane.

○

Before a landscape sprouts those giant stepladders that pump oil
or before far out iron mosquitoes attach to the sea
there is this sortilege with phones that plug into mapped soil,
the odd gelignite bump to shake trucks, paper scribbling out serially
as men dial Barrier Reefs long enfolded beneath the geology
or listen for black Freudian beaches; they seek a miles-wide pustular
rock dome of pure Crude, a Saint Pauls-in-profundis. There are
many
wrong numbers on the geophone, but it's brought us some
distance — and by car.
Every machine has been love and a true answer.

○

Not a high studded ship boiling cauliflower under her keel
nor a ghost in bootlaced canvas — just a length of country road
afloat between two shores, winding wet wire rope reel-to-reel,
dismissing romance sternwards. Six cars and a hay truck are her load
plus a thoughtful human cast which could, in some dramatic
episode,

become a world. All machines in the end join God's creation
growing bygone, given, changeless—but a river ferry has its
timeless mode
from the grinding reedy outset; it enforces contemplation.
We arrive. We traverse depth in thudding silence. We go on.

Yves Bonnefoy

II

And I think of the absent Kore, who picked
The flowers' shimmering black hearts
And fell, unawakened, drinking the blackness,
On the meadow of light, and of shade. I understand
This fault, which is death. The jasmine and asphodels
Are of our land. The banks
Of the shallow, limpid, green water make the shadow
Of the world's heart tremble . . . Yes, pick them.
The fault of the cut flowers is returned to us,
The soul is arched above some simple words,
The grisaille is lost among the ripe fruit.

The blade of the words of war is dispersed
In joyful, unchanging matter.

III

Yes, it is that.
A dazzling light in the ancient words.

Editor's Note: These poems are from the sequence "Dialogue of Anguish and Desire," excerpted from *Words in Stone* by Yves Bonnefoy. They are printed by permission of Random House, Inc.

The tiering up
Of our whole lives far off, like a joyful
Sea lit up by a live water's sword.

We no longer need
Torn images to love,
The tree over there is enough for us, coming unbound
From itself with the light, knowing now
Only the name almost uttered of a god almost incarnate.

And all this high land burnt by the One so near

And the plaster of this wall touched by simple time
With its hands of no sadness, hands that have measured.

Translated by Lisa Sapinkopf

Rachel Hadas

AFTER THE STROKE

All day, the gong of silence.
Boom-boom goes what's unspoken.
I read you mild exotica;
mildly the spell is broken.

Basques; Madrid; Gibraltar;
the Raj in its last days;
gypsies in a caravan;
Barcelona now. We laze

happily down the Ramblas,
its cobbles shadowed green
with foliage of spring plane trees.
Down with the Old Regime!

cry batlike squeaking voices.
The cobbles run with blood.
Columbus high in the harbor
points to the New World.

I shut the book. Already
lunchtime! To refuel,
to rest, to get you up again—
symmetrical but cruel

to help you put your nightgown on,
brush teeth, brush scanty hair,
tuck you into the twin bed
and leave you God knows where.

Surely you go free dreaming?
Tell me—a bird, you flew
out over the spring golf course,
explored a world made new,

skimmed to Maine, the island,
lobsters, rocks, the sea—
and over there is Kansas
and you are twenty-three.

You're holding babies, cooking . . .
Or this: you lived and died.
The stroke had never happened.
Arthur was at your side.

All this is helpless make-believe.
Why should you share the key
to your private hoard of treasures?
So, dream-god, visit me:

A banquet hall. A dais.
An interrupted feast.
The king has left the table.
Cut to winter waste,

pink dawn, frozen river,
round hills that gleam with snow,
a pristine world I'm showing two
explorers before they go

on inland to the source, the source.
But—sun on leafy trees,
dog-thump on the dusty stairs:
we wake into our lives.

I'm taken aback each visit by
how stale these seem, how small,
as if with each new morning
we crawled into a hole.

Yes, any new day must shut doors
on vistas from last night,
but here the slam is ruthless.
Hardly a crack of light

survives each silent rising.
Separate, we brace ourselves.
The daily bandage settles
snugly over the house.

Stuart Dischell

HISTORY LESSONS

(Henry Adams)

I sat on the side of the world
Trying to find my place.
The classroom globe spun on its axis:
New World, Old World, continents, nations, states.
I could almost see my house and street.
I thought, "This is what God sees when he looks down."

And we look up to him, the old schoolmaster,
Seated at his desk in front of the room,
Urging us to be good—a virgin, a lamb—
Scaring us to work with his dreadful flame.

Like Grandfather in the library,
He wants to be fair, will pause
In the busyness of his days
To walk the boy to school.

* * *

The silence of a woman's absence.

An empty house, the spoken and unspoken blame.
I'd like to say I did the best I could for her,
But there was my work to be done.
And there was always but.

The honest historian does not write
Of his own times. When I was young
I wanted to be objective. But
There were family scores to settle.
And Madison and Jefferson.

The silence of a woman's absence.

Still after thirty years
I cannot write the portrait of my lady.

* * *

Fenestration, a word as ugly as the thing
Is beautiful. Mont St. Michel.
Relics of rose windows.

The Lord of Light leaping into shadow,
Hurling himself forward and upward,
Vanquishing infidels
And Saxons.

The knights support Duke William
And The Bastard supports his king.
The crypts support the halls
And the halls support the nave.

At Coutances, moving up the tower,
The square becomes the octagon,
The octagon the arrow.

Holy is our architecture,
The marriage of human aspiration.
We love our art and god.

So the historian of another age
Or planet, who unearths the statues
From what was once this world,
Might find among the ruins of commerce

On earth there lived a people with wings.

Sue Standing

WATERLILIES IN THE MUDDY RIVER

Waking to riverlight and pulse of traffic
on Storrow Drive, you go to the window
and see that, almost overnight, green discs
of waterlilies have spilled into this inlet

of the Muddy River, part of Olmsted's
nearly vanished Emerald Necklace.
These are not Monet's *Nymphéas*,
rising and dissolving into air:

these are heavy, rooted in the dark river.
Underneath, swimming among strong stems,
you know there are carp, orange and lucent.
You know rivers and the names for pain,

and when you touch me, my body
becomes transparent. You know
what the rhythms of my blood mean.
And as I watch your eyes skim the river,

I want you to know — whatever this room holds,
whatever I hold for you — these lilies survive,
and chicory and crickets fill the fields
of late summer, even in the city.

Michael Mott

MOZAMBIQUE

At sixteen I lost
what little virginity remained
from loving myself
to the hotel whore
of the Hotel Polama

She was fourteen
I didn't know
when she whispered
"lento mais lento"
the police chiefs
the casino owners
owned her

I have never paid
for a woman —
slow, go slowly —

When the raucous birds
retched in the dawn light
when the gardener
hunted snakes with a hoe
through the bourgainvillea
I awoke alone

I have never stopped
paying for a woman
Dogs asleep in the streets
of Lourenço Marques
cheap sunsets
sharknets and a sea
which arrived exhausted
smelling of skin

Each day on the beach
boys the color of tea
kicked a tiny black ball
with their heels —
so agile. So somber
the hallways at night

In my closet the coathangers
jangle together
like small bells
like a secret marina

Judith Berke

WE KNOW NOW

We know now the awful snarl
on the face of Gargantua
was a burn, a wound.
The truth was in his slumped shoulders,

the sad inward gaze that is
a gorilla. And yet
we didn't know, knew nothing,

as the moment in '44
when the shrieking, inhuman
Japanese soldiers
stepped out of the posters
and bowed so gracefully before us.

How can we go on? How do we stand it?
The dinosaurs lie down
so quietly, so suddenly,
and up come the tiniest lizards.

And we? Later? Do we just
slide quietly under?
Do I choose you? As delicate
as a Himalayan monk?

Who will tell us? The moon,
not even alive, and pulls so terribly on our bodies,

the cells, the genes below that
singing only
blue eyes, blue eyes, blue eyes . . .

Frank J. Nisetich

JANUARY

No question of it now.
It's not what I'd prefer.
I'm glad, I don't know how
but glad this side of fear.

Maybe it simplifies,
makes the complex plain,
does away with surprise
or diagnoses pain.

It could be all of these.
It could be something else —
shedding an old disease,
ridding a rabid self.

Habitual hope persists,
bursting into light.
Socrates rubs his wrists.
The Delian ship's in sight.

What cause is there to grieve
for hemlock or for gall
if subtle fingers heave
aside the garden wall?

But father you're not wise
and I must disallow
what contradicts my eyes
or turns from here and now.

These burning blades of ice
pointing to the sill
speak of a paradise
forged by human will.

Jane Mayhall

SUNLIGHT ON FIRE ESCAPES

They are delicate ladders, Feininger shadows;
fire escapes lose, in sunlight, heavier densities.
Windows look, by contrast, too intentional, metal

and glass. But the spiral moments of fluting
on bricks show, alternately, that nothing need

be lasting, yet be true. A note about fretworks,
flicking down walls: they are even more like paint-
ings, in fade and illuminations; holding references at
bay. You can almost breathe the light of what you see.

Brian O'Neill

REVISE, REVISE

When we cross Colfax Avenue, it's deep, hard
walking; mother counts our bus fare in the alcove
of the Palais Royal; her cracked hands guard
my face from snow: I should revise, revise, but love
refuses like a small town to change a single street,
so I hear her voice above the shower
at my father's house, calling us to eat,
the eggs poached soft, coffee ready to drink just now.
If this poem's not for you, reader, or anyone else,
if the bad washer in the shower head is a version
of love, gratuitous, irregular, a hiss
thrumming in the walls, then another version
refuses to leave without you, already late for mass,
her long suffering frown bent on our salvation.

Gideon Telpaz

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM STYRON

On April 17, 1983, after seeing the film "Sophie's Choice," Elie Wiesel published an article in the Sunday Arts and Leisure section of The New York Times, entitled "Does the Holocaust Lie Beyond the Reach of Art?" in which he challenged William Styron's capability of "imagining the unimaginable." A survivor of the concentration camps, Wiesel maintained: "Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend." Asserting that "the Holocaust has turned out to be the latest attraction; it is 'in' as far as show business is concerned," Wiesel denounced any tendency to portray the "executioners" as "humans," or "to make us understand them." My conversation with William Styron, in which the author of the novel Sophie's Choice responded to accusations made in Wiesel's article, took place several weeks later in New York City.

GT: What was your initial reaction to Wiesel's article?

WS: I read it with some irritation, and I had an urge to respond, but I took my own counsel about that and said, "No, I'm not going to do that." I did have it, though, in the back of my mind. I did feel it was saying things which muddled rather than clarified.

GT: Did you take it as a personal affront?

WS: Only at one point, where he used the word "honesty," or "total honesty," implying the lack of it on my part.

GT: Wiesel argues, "Only survivors of Auschwitz know what it meant to be in Auschwitz."

WS: It is simply not true. We've got to get rid of this idea that there is something sacrosanct about the Holocaust. Somehow, Wiesel has given the impression, and it's the wrong impression, that it's something so out of the bounds of mortal comprehension that we mustn't deal with it. He said in that piece something about his silence, and of course that's what George Steiner said. Well, I don't believe that.

GT: The point Wiesel is trying to make is that no words can convey the horrors of Auschwitz. He says, "Auschwitz defies imagination and perception; it submits only to memory. It can be communicated by testimony, not by fiction." He also says, "What we really wish to say, what we feel we must say, cannot be said."

WS: The contradiction lies in his own work. He counsels silence but he's been writing incessantly about it. How can a man, who has spent his life writing about something, deny to other people the right to deal with it? Especially, I might add, when it can never be proven that just because a person has experienced something it makes him a better artistic witness. On the crudest level of recapitulation of art and experience, I'm talking about writing novels based on real events. The best novel about combat and the horror, the bloody horror, of the American Civil War, was *The Red Badge of Courage*, written by a young man who never saw a war. It remains, to my mind, the single greatest fictional work about the Civil War. It was a totally imagined, or almost totally imagined, recreation of the horror of war.

GT: What Wiesel claims is that there's nothing that can be compared to the Holocaust. It's the greatest mystery of all times.

WS: Given my understanding of it, as a most appalling and truly desolating cataclysm, what still prevents someone who has not experienced it from trying to deal with it on his own terms? That brings me to the second point I felt Wiesel was making. He said or implied, to universalize the Holocaust is to trivialize it, because it was a singularly Jewish experience which no one else had any right to be drawn into.

GT: Should *Sophie's Choice* be regarded at all as a book about the Holocaust?

WS: It may not be about the Holocaust in the traditional sense as Elie Wiesel comprehends it. I can't accept his contention that to universalize it is to trivialize or to falsify it; I think he also used the word "dejudify." My book is, I believe, one long testimony to the agony of Jewish suffering. There is no place in the story where I try to minimize it.

GT: You make a point of telling the reader through Wanda, a member of the Polish underground, that everyone was a victim, and that the Jews, although "the victims of victims," as she referred to them, were not the only ones to suffer.

WS: That was not in the movie, it was in the book certainly, and I would, on a purely pragmatic level, say that. Maybe this is worth "dejudifying." We do know that a large number of non-Jews perished at Auschwitz. This is indisputable.

GT: He says not all victims were Jewish but all Jews were victims.

WS: Well, that's true — up to a point. Many Jews were victims. All Jews were potential victims. All European Jews were potential

victims. All Jews were not victims because many were more victimized than others, including those who weren't sent to Auschwitz.

GT: If *Sophie's Choice* is not a book about the Holocaust à la Wiesel, how then should we understand the role the Holocaust plays in it?

WS: I think it is a book in which the Holocaust is overwhelmingly present, but which is more than that—a metaphor for something else. The metaphor lay in the title of the book—choice, Sophie's choice. The metaphor lay in the epigraph I use in the book from Malraux: "I seek that essential region of the soul where absolute evil confronts brotherhood." What is absolute evil? Absolute evil, to my mind, as a metaphor, is, or can be, or must be, an act in which a woman is forced to murder her own child, whether she be Jewish, Gypsy, Pole, Russian, French, or whatever. This seized me as being a metaphor for absolute evil as represented by Nazism. That is what impelled me more than anything else to write about the Holocaust. Not, God forbid, to write it from the vantage point of Elie Wiesel, the point of view of the barracks, the tortures, the beatings, the terrible deprivation.

GT: Why not?

WS: Because I didn't feel confident enough to write about it this way. I don't claim, I never claimed and would never claim to be an authority on Auschwitz or on the Holocaust. This only Elie Wiesel can be in a sense because he was there. He can tell me things that I am sure I have heard about; he can sear it on my memory in a way that perhaps no one else can, but I'm not claiming in my view of the Holocaust to have his vision of it. I have another vision, another metaphor, and I'm offended by the idea that somehow the metaphor of Sophie being forced to choose to murder one of her children is not a perfectly valid use of the Holocaust.

GT: You also describe some of the horrors of the Holocaust and not just the fact that she had to choose.

WS: I do that too, but as you know I'm very, very careful never to get too close to the thing. Aside from the feeling that I might have been inauthentic, I didn't want to deal in what might be construed as the pornography of violence; describing some Nazi thug taking a club and beating some wretched poor Jewish woman to the ground or something like that. It was not in my scheme.

GT: You are haunted by the phenomenon of slavery. In the book, you say: "I knew that in the fever of my mind and in the most un-

quiet regions of my heart I would be shackled by slavery as long as I remained a writer.”

WS: I'm always concerned with themes that have to do with human domination. Slavery in its active form is probably the most powerful example of that.

GT: Could this be one of the reasons which made you write about Auschwitz?

WS: It may have been. First was the metaphor. I'll be quite frank. The thing that drove me to write the book was the image of a woman being forced to choose: it dominated me from the beginning to the end.

GT: How did you come upon this image? Was it something that you witnessed?

WS: It was something I'd heard very soon after World War II, when I was in college and I was reading about the Holocaust. There were one or two witness accounts. There was a book by Olga Lengyel. It was called *Five Chimneys*. She was a Rumanian doctor. She arrived at the camp with her children. She didn't have to make a choice, an active choice, like Sophie did. She had two children, and she sensed something was going haywire during the selection process and by guessing wrong, trying to shelter her child, in some way making him seem smaller or bigger, she realized later she had inadvertently sent him to the gas chamber. She described that very graphically in the very first pages of her book, which was not a terribly good book, but very, very honest and, as I say, very graphic.

GT: Was this the first time you had read about the Holocaust?

WS: Yes. I was just a kid in college. Then, while I was reading *Eichmann in Jerusalem* by Hannah Arendt, at some place in that book I had a sense of déjà vu. Arendt gave the example of the Gypsy woman who was forced to choose between her two children. This is what the Nazis were up to. And that all of a sudden reestablished my contact with the Holocaust and my desire to do something about it. This was way back in the sixties, long before I began to write the book.

GT: Talking about evil, in *Sophie's Choice*, you say, “Real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring.” I believe you were quoting Simone Weil.

WS: Yes. I read Simone Weil. Her meditations on that kind of institutionalized evil struck me as being extraordinarily insightful.

GT: Did you travel to Auschwitz? Did you talk to survivors?

WS: I went to Auschwitz in 1974, and I saw quite a few survivors in Warsaw. I was incredibly moved by all of it. Especially Birkenau; the vastness of it. It was so huge, the total sterilized area for that camp. Birkenau and Auschwitz plus the outlying places which were completely stripped of Polish inhabitants. It was a devastating sight. It was horrendous. And you want to get out of there certainly by nightfall. To stay in Auschwitz after nightfall would be unthinkable. So I went back to Cracow.

WS: When you wrote about the camp you often made a juxtaposition between smoke which came out of the chimneys, and the pasture and the cows and the healthy people who were also part of the picture—the nonvictims. In a way, you do something which Wiesel is arguing against—spotlighting, in the chapter on Rudolf Höss, the executioner, while the victims, the Jewish victims, recede into the background. I'll read you the exact quotation from Wiesel. He claims, "The Holocaust has turned out to be the latest attraction; it is 'in,' as far as show business is concerned. There are now docudramas, plays, musicals; Adolf Eichmann? An inoffensive officer with courteous manners. Hitler? Crazy. The butcher of Rome, Herbert Kapler, is to be pitied: a man with a keen sense of duty. . . . All of a sudden, the emphasis has shifted from victims to their executioners. They are being analyzed, dissected, explained: They are being shown to be 'human,' sensitive to art and ideas; everything is done to make us understand them."

WS: I read all that. I find that there is nothing wrong with that. Yet I don't know what his point is. This is what Hannah Arendt was consistently trying to impress on people—that they were human. She hated them too, but her point, unlike what I assume was Wiesel's, is that unless we are intensely aware that they were human and often indeed responsive to art and so on, we tend to put them in the category of monsters or something called the supernatural. The danger is precisely that, being human like you and me, they were capable of these horrors. This to me is where Wiesel misses the point.

GT: Are you familiar with the author Katzatnik? He is a survivor of Auschwitz who lives in Israel. He wrote several books on Auschwitz.

WS: Yes, I have heard of him.

GT: As you recall, he appeared in the Eichmann trial. He was the one who fainted on the witness stand. When he was asked recently,

I think by Mike Wallace of “60 Minutes,” why he had fainted, he replied—and I paraphrase—“Not because I saw Eichmann, not because of all the horrors, but because all of a sudden I realized that Eichmann can be me and I can be Eichmann.”

WS: In a nutshell that’s what Wiesel seems to be ignorant about, or doesn’t want to face. When I portrayed Rudolf Höss I did not try to mitigate the evils of the man or make him look less or more human than he was. The point is: he was human. He wasn’t particularly nice, but he wasn’t particularly un-nice. He certainly was not a monster. I’m sure the Nazis employed dyed-in-the-wool sadists, psychopathic monsters, to really do the worst work around the crematoriums. They have psychopaths like that in American prisons who are happy to do those sorts of things. But someone like Rudolf Höss had to be a bureaucrat, had to be very human, and if Wiesel doesn’t recognize that, he’s dealing in dangerous insights rather than in anything else.

GT: Is it feasible to expect a survivor to attain the epic distance necessary to write objectively about this horrible experience?

WS: It is important, it seems to me, to deal with the oppressors and not only with the victims. It’s of utmost importance to find out what made Eichmann tick, and what made Rudolph Höss tick. Because these were the ones who were in the eye of the storm. To ignore them is to ignore a very important part of the whole story.

GT: Did writing about Auschwitz have any therapeutic relevance to you as a man and an artist?

WS: I suppose it had a certain kind of cathartic effect, surely. I mean, I wanted to cough this up out of my system, and to do it in some way that would have a meaningful effect on myself. Whether it was therapeutic, I don’t know. I know I felt awfully good when the book was finished, and I’d realized I’d done as well as I could, given the material I had.

GT: While the book was in progress, in addition to the classical struggle with the material itself—did you have to struggle with the theme?

WS: I had certain struggles, yes. You know, it’s very hard to recapitulate—you must as a writer realize this—to recapitulate your own motives at certain times, when you’re off away from what you’ve done several years. You lose sight of the moments of determination. It’s all lost in a kind of gestalt. But certain things I remember. For instance, when I started out having Sophie tell about her “humane” father—what a wonderful man he was, how he hid Jews

in Poland—I knew that this was all right, but I really knew that deep down inside there was something wrong with it. I suddenly realized Sophie was lying. I discovered this intuitively, and that’s where I broke through to a very significant area in the book. I realized that this is the place where I’d be able to explore Polish anti-Semitism by making her father an anti-Semite whom she was trying to cover up. So those moments were critical moments for the making of the book.

GT: And then you felt you had a grip on it?

WS: Yes, I realized that I was getting into the complexity of the thing, and that I wasn’t trying to simplify it, and that I was really trying, in the best sense, to complicate the book for the sake of reality.

GT: You didn’t set out to erect a monument to the Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Wiesel did, when he wrote his books. He wished to commemorate the Jews of his hometown, his relatives, the people he knew in his childhood, who met their death in the concentration camps. This is a basic difference between the two of you.

WS: I wasn’t trying to establish any kind of monument. As a matter of fact, had I made Sophie Jewish, I think it would have become a banal story.

GT: Did you try to describe her, at one place, as sharing the Jewish fate by having her arm tattooed?

WS: I certainly didn’t intend that. As a matter of fact, as you might recall, there’s a very explicit passage where I try to describe why so many non-Jews are tattooed. Because the Jews were going right to the gas chambers they didn’t need to be tattooed. That was the reason why today all over Poland many of the non-Jewish survivors you see are tattooed. Often they will admit it: “The Jews were going to the gas chambers, we had to be tattooed because they wanted to keep track of us.” You don’t tattoo someone you’re sending to the gas chambers. Some Jews were tattooed because at one time the Germans wanted slave labor so badly, that they couldn’t afford to send people to the gas chambers. That’s when both Poles and Jews were being tattooed.

GT: As a Jew, I am forever opinionated about the Holocaust. I might never be able to view it adequately through a “universal” perspective. We touched on it before; still I would like to hear you more on it. Would you accept that the war was a war against the Jews?

WS: Yes, I would. I've said this over and over again, and I think I've said it several times in the book.

GT: Could Sophie's fate have been a Jewish fate?

WS: In a sense.

GT: She survives, though, and you bring her to Brooklyn, where she meets Stingo, the narrator. What was your purpose in bringing her to Brooklyn?

WS: That was the strategy of the story, to bring it into the American grain. I'm an American. I'm descended from a long line of American storytellers. What I had tried to do was to imbed the story of this Polish woman in some recognizable American matrix, where the reader could begin to see the story unfold through peculiarly American eyes, namely the narrator Stingo.

GT: Who was the reader you had in mind?

WS: Because I am an American, I probably think in terms of an American reader, and was talking about the story in a kind of American way and locating it in my own home ground, my own territory.

GT: Your territory? Yetta Zimmerman's Jewish rooming house and the Yiddish spoken there?

WS: Yiddish is not foreign to me. I know a lot of it. I've been around Jews all my life. If you have as many friends as I do who were brought up in families where Yiddish was spoken as a mother tongue by either the parents or grandparents, you get exposed to it too. Ever since I lived in New York, practically more than half of my friends have had this background. They liberally sprinkle their own conversation with Yiddishisms. I've been growing up with a knowledge of a kind of 'pidgin Yiddish,' if you want to call it that.

GT: Your use of Yiddishisms in the book appears to be precise and accurate. Every Yiddishism you use, not only do you not repeat it twice in the book, it's always in the right place.

WS: I struggled very hard to get that tone, and I also had a very good book to rely on, Leo Rosten's *The Joys of Yiddish*. That was a great help. I don't actually speak Yiddish myself, but I know the idioms.

GT: In the book, when Stingo recalls his growing up in the small Southern town, he betrays his fascination with the local Jewish community. His fascination comes out in his descriptions of the synagogue and the way he speculates about what the Jews did inside, and the mysterious way in which they disappeared into the

Jewish fold after the regular business hours.

WS: In the South, a town like the one I lived in had a very distinct Jewish community, a visible one. Small towns in America—South and North—have had a merchant class of Jews. There was a very strong Jewish consciousness among Jews in the South. I've always felt there's some connection between the Jewish consciousness and the racial problem in the South. There was very little real anti-Semitism of the virulent sort that you get elsewhere, or have gotten elsewhere—not so much in America but in Europe. The South was a fairly placid place for Jews. Partly, it's due to the fact that the Negro problem siphoned off a lot of ugly energy. If you had a scapegoat, in the form of blacks, you didn't have to hate Jews. My father was a real Southerner to his fingertips. He was born in 1889, not too long after the Civil War, during a time of extreme racism, and had however a kind of liberal attitude toward people in general. He was a humane person. Well advanced, in terms of his humaneness, for that era. He would always tell me—he didn't realize he was patronizing—things like, "Now we'll go to this little gift shop run by Mr. Morgenstern." That was a Levantine Jew, a very good looking man, and very expansive. He had a very nice gift shop—china, silver, and so on.

GT: Where was that?

WS: In this town in Virginia, Newport News, a small city, large industry, big shipbuilding. My father would talk to Mr. Morgenstern, about families and so on. My father would leave, and he would say—I was about eleven or twelve—"Billy, you must never forget the Jews are the salt of the earth. They're like our people; they have a good tradition; they're decent people; they care about traditions." This was his attitude. It was always sort of self-conscious, but with lots of respect. And that would extend to practically all the Jews my father would encounter, and there were quite a few, because both he and they were involved in community work. I mean, there was a crossover. My father would say, "Mr. Cahn is one of the finest men I've ever known. An outstanding man!"

GT: This was in the early stage of innocence. In time you, or your protagonist Stingo, came to know Leslie Lapidus, the phoney sex-pot, and the perspective changed.

WS: Yes, indeed. But that's an invention. Leslie is a total invention.

GT: Yet she reflects a certain concept of the Jewish American Princess.

WS: I just recreated it more or less out of whole cloth, without really ever having encountered a true Jewish Princess like her.

GT: Do you think you might have in any way been influenced by Jewish fellow writers who describe Jewish Princesses?

WS: To some extent. Yes, Philip Roth. My friend Philip Roth.

GT: In contrast to the sardonic tone you use toward Leslie, your empathy for Sophie, who lives under the shadow of the death camps, is conspicuous. In talking about the tragic love of Sophie and Nathan, Wiesel comments, "She loved him and he loved her and yet—it's complicated, I know: people such as Sophie and Nathan, they can be found everywhere in the rubble of history."

WS: I don't know what he's trying to get at there. I read that but I don't know what his point is.

GT: Later on he says, "Far from Birkenau, long after the war, Styron seems to be saying, one still dies there."

WS: Well, that was true. Certainly that was an ancillary part of the book. I certainly did not wish to disguise the fact that the power and evil of Auschwitz was sufficient to reach out and kill Sophie long after her departure. I always felt Nathan was simply an instrument.

GT: A most powerful one.

WS: One had to be, in order to destroy Sophie.

GT: Did you form him after somebody you knew?

WS: He's sort of an amalgam, drawn in exaggerated terms, of a lot of Jewish friends I've had. People I've known ever since I came North. I had a roommate who was a bit like Nathan, not nearly as self-destructive, who was Jewish, when I first lived in New York. A sculptor.

GT: Is it correct to assume that once Sophie finds herself in America, she has no choice but to gravitate to a place where Jews were heavily concentrated, such as Brooklyn, and to an affair with a Jew, in order to complete a tragic cycle of destiny?

WS: That may be. There's some atonement she was making in her relationship with Nathan.

GT: They needed one another to destroy each other?

WS: They were both seeking destruction.

GT: Why was she seeking destruction? She had survived. She came to a new world, started a new life. Was it the guilt of the survivor?

WS: Partly, I think.

GT: You brought her from, as you call it in one place, "her sojourn in the bowels of hell," and in another place you call it "society of

the walking dead,” to Brooklyn, to Mrs. Zimmerman’s “Pink Palace,” which, as it turned out, was just the final station on her way to the gas chamber. Do you think all survivors are irredeemably haunted by the burden of a death they had managed to escape?

WS: I really don’t know. I can’t answer that.

GT: Were you asked to appear before the gathering of survivors that took place recently in Washington?

WS: No, I wasn’t.

GT: Would you have talked to them had you been invited? Would you have anything to say?

WS: If they had wished to solicit me, my feelings, I don’t think I would have had anything to say.

GT: You had so much to say in your book.

WS: But that’s the difference. That’s the difference between life and art—if I may so dignify the book by calling it art. There is a difference, and I think Elie Wiesel seems not to perceive certain aspects of the part that’s art.

GT: According to the captions *The New York Times* gave Wiesel’s article, the questions are: “Does the Holocaust defeat the artist? Does the Holocaust lie beyond the reach of art?” According to Elie Wiesel it does. According to you—it does not. Is it basically a question of the quality of the artist?

WS: I think of course, ultimately, it always comes down to the quality of the artist. I would say that’s what the artist is for, on his mission, if he has a mission. To be able to take almost anything and deal with it.

GT: The book, in spite of the fact that it is dealing with tragic people and their tragic end, ends on an optimistic note. When Stingo wakes up in the morning on the last page, he is ready for a new beginning. One cycle is over, another is about to begin. He is looking forward to the new day.

WS: Yes, I think so. The only other way for Stingo to end it would be on a scream of despair. But I always perceived him going to that beach and seeing the morning star and realizing that tomorrow is another day, “excellent and fair.”

GT: Mainly Stingo’s coming of age?

WS: The book has been called *bildungsroman*. It may be. Among other things it meant to show the rite of passage of a young man from relative innocence into manhood.

GT: Initiation ceremonies, especially as demonstrated by primitive rites, are associated with intimations of death, whether real or symbolic. Could the deaths of the two lovers, Sophie and Nathan, be seen as symbols of Stingo's initiation?

WS: *Sophie's Choice* is Stingo's tale. This is why Stingo is so utterly essential to the whole story. If I had told it any other way the book would not have made any ripples at all. It had to be told through the eyes of this young man—this young American—and this is what I think Wiesel totally ignores, or chooses to ignore. Perhaps it's a story not so much of Auschwitz but of discovering evil. It's a time-honored technique to have the young man revealed through a reminiscence by the older man of his youthful experience. This was a measure of my distance from Auschwitz. Had I gotten any closer, even if I had tried to tell it totally from Sophie's point of view, it would have lacked resonance and would have had no conviction whatsoever.

GT: One last question. Why should Auschwitz figure at all in Stingo's rite of passage?

WS: Because Stingo the elder, I, the alter ego, felt an absolute fascination with Auschwitz. When I conceived the book, it was without knowing exactly where I was headed, but I wanted desperately to deal with Auschwitz, and I realized the only way I could do it was to take this dewy-eyed young boy and expose him to the mysteries as revealed through Sophie.

GT: When you look back at it, do you think there is a mystery left untold about Auschwitz?

WS: I did not in any sense claim to have resolved the mystery. In fact, at the end of the book, I say that point-blank: no one will ever understand Auschwitz. But I also said that what I hoped to demonstrate through Sophie's life and her death was how absolute evil has never, will never, vanish from the world.

George Stade

WOMANIST FICTION AND MALE CHARACTERS

Twice I have heard Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, published in 1982, described as "a sacred text," once by a true believer, once by a village aesthete. Certainly the extra-textual evidence is with the true believer: the novel has been a bestseller, first in hardcover and now in paperback; it won the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award; many of the reviews were written with a hushed and unctuous reverence. Dissertations are in the works; so is a movie. In a collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden* (1983), Miss Walker explicitly announces the attractive dogma that informs her novel. The subtitle of this collection is "Womanist Prose."

"Womanist," as Miss Walker defines it, describes (among other things) "a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers woman's culture, woman's emotional flexibility (and values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and woman's strength. . . . *Loves* the spirit *Loves* herself. *Regardless.*" Although Miss Walker, in her words, is "a rather ardent feminist," her feminism can be distinguished from her womanism, in theory if not in her practice. Both can be distinguished from women's liberationism.

Feminism, let us say, is a political program based on the reasonable premise that since women are as good as men in fact, they should be equal to them under the law. But womanism is based on invidious comparisons between the sexes; another name for it might be "female chauvinism." Women's liberation, on the other hand, was a crisis cult produced (through antithesis) by what we might as well call the manist sexual ambience of the sixties, which led men to believe they had a right to sex on demand and which undermined the woman's traditional right to say no. In America the red stockings are always blue, or at least purple.

The Color Purple has its deepest tinges of women's liberation at its conclusion, with the establishment of a utopian commune presided over by the heroine and her female lover, although a couple of womanish men are allowed to hang around, so long as they behave themselves. But the novel is not feminist—it does not argue the

equality of the sexes; it dramatizes, rather, the virtues of women and the vices of men. Like one of its predecessors, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), the first great womanist novel in English, *The Color Purple* is unfolded through a series of letters. In *Pamela*, the virtuous heroine is pursued by the randy Mr. B. until she catches him. Redeemed by her example, he becomes her reward. In *The Color Purple*, the heroine, Celie, is pestered by the sexual demands of her husband, Mr. _____, until she stabs him in the hand, wins over his mistress for herself, and finally redeems him by unsexing him. He is allowed to stay on as a kind of assistant seamstress.

From the first letter, written by Celie to God, we learn that "Pa" won't leave his wife alone, even though she has just had her sixth child and is deathly sick. ("When we have asked for love, we have been given children," says Miss Walker in an essay.) When his wife goes to visit a doctor, Pa rapes Celie, who is fourteen. ("A girl child ain't safe in a family of men.") By the second letter Pa has managed to kill his wife, by whose corpse he sits, dropping crocodile tears—"don't leave me, don't go." We also learn that he has stolen off with Celie's and his baby, most likely to kill it, for Pa is the primal ogre, the type of all men. By the third letter he has taken Celie's and his second baby away, probably to sell it. More ominously still, "I see him looking at my little sister." From the fourth letter we learn that Pa has brought home a new wife, another teenager: "He be on her all the time. She walk around like she don't know what hit her." And little sister Nettie has got a new suitor, Mr. _____, no improvement on Pa and also a recent widower. His wife "was kilt by her boyfriend coming home from church."

And so it goes, as Pa gives Celie to Mr. _____; as Nettie runs away from Pa and Mr. _____ to become a missionary; as Harpo, in imitation of his father, Mr. _____, tries to beat his wife, who thrashes him soundly ("Oh, boo-hoo, he cry. Boo-hoo-hoo"); as Mr. _____'s mistress, Shug, moves in and gives Celie her first orgasm; as Pa, who in a melodramatic twist turns out not to be Celie's Pa after all, serves poetic justice by dying while on top of another woman; as Celie becomes a successful designer of fancy pants for women; and as all the persecuted maids (including Nettie, who in another melodramatic twist has been raising Celie's children) come together in the tremendously happy ending.

As for the men, with a few telling exceptions they are brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self-pitying. They are misogynist and they are

pedophobic ("he hate children and he hate where they come from"). They are petty, spiteful, "hurtful," and treacherous. They are also arrogant, complacent, lazy, insensitive, incompetent, vain, inartistic, contemptuous of women, but quick to take credit for their work. Above all, they are lechers, mechanical monsters of sexual appetite.

What makes men so awful we never learn. The male characters in this novel, all black, are not, as we might think, made awful by their mistreatment at the hands of whites. Nettie's letters from Africa, where the men are just as awful, make precisely that point. ("Wherever there's a man, there's trouble.") We do learn that Harpo, against the grain, is awful to women because that is what his father, Mr. _____, taught him to be. And then we learn that Mr. _____ is awful to women because that is what *his* father forced him to be. Harpo, left to himself, would have been happy cooking, watching the kids, doing the housework for his amazon wife. Even the formidable Mr. _____, as he says, "use to try to sew along with mama cause that's what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it." Celie, in short, redeems these men by giving them the courage to be women, by releasing the woman already in them. But masculinity is unredeemable; masculinity is radical evil, irreducible, the causeless cause of all that's wrong in the world.

Such a view of men informs many recent novels and short stories, tales of a woman who leaves an impossible husband or lover or father, only to suffer further indignities at the hands of other lustful men, finally to find happiness or at least health in the embrace of a career (usually artistic), or another woman, or, in a few cases, in cohabitation with a homosexual male, a man happy to grant the heroine a room of her own, "preferably one with a key and a lock," as Alice Walker puts it.

These fictions, written over the last twenty years, since about the time Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* was published, are an advance over their womanist predecessors in at least one way: no glamorous male is awarded to the heroine as a prize for her virtue; the rejection of men and all their ways is at last explicit — is, in fact, the conclusion and climax toward which everything else in these works tends. But these works also, in a number of ways, revert to their predecessors, to their narcissism, their sentimentality, their melodrama, their championing of domesticity over the public world of masculine power plays, and their nondenominational religiosity (*The Color Purple* is dedicated, "To the Spirit: without whose assistance neither this

book nor I would have been written." Celie, Nettie, and Shug all pay their tribute to the Spirit. "God is everything, say Shug.")

Frankenstein, or *The Modern Prometheus* is womanist in this sense. So is *Jane Eyre*. So are Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. But the long high noon of womanist fiction extended over the two middle quarters of nineteenth-century America. During that period, liberal ministers and Northeastern middle class women joined forces to beget the sentimental firstborn of American mass culture. Such is the argument of Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, one of the few truly important recent studies of American literature and society. As Miss Douglas shows, middlebrow ladies' magazines such as *Godey's*, *Graham's*, and *Peterson's*, far outsold those for high-brows or men. During the 1850s, any one of the more popular womanist novels outsold all of the works of Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman published during the whole decade. As one male competitor, his mouth pursed with sour grapes, complained, "It is the women who read. It is the women who are the tribunal of any question aside from politics or business. It is the women who give or withhold a literary reputation. It is the women who regulate the style of living. . . . It is the women who exercise the ultimate control over the press."

The kind of writing that brought on this diatribe, in Miss Douglas' words, was frequently informed by "a massive hatred of the male world," by "narcissistic rage," by a need to demonstrate that "any woman is better than any man." The nonclerical male characters, by and large, are "either awkward brutes, stumbling amid female subtleties, or wistful would-be transvestites"—which is what Alice Walker's Harpo and Mr. _____ turn out to be. Popular as they were, the domestic-sentimental novels of the mid-century are no longer read outside of the classroom with one exception.¹ That exception is *Uncle Tom's Cabin* which according to Harriet Beecher Stowe, "God wrote," and which is the spiritual progenitor of *The Color Purple*, not because of the race issue, the emotional hot spot of neither novel, but because of their shared womanism.

Harriet Beecher Stowe objected to slavery for a number of good reasons—because it was unjust, because it was un-Christian, and above all, because it separated women from their children, as we are

1. Womanist critics have launched an attempt to revive interest in Susan Warner and Sarah Orne Jewett.

shown in twenty lurid scenes. But more intimately and feelingly, she objected to slavery as a "patriarchal institution." Her slaves, that is, are stand-ins for women; their trials and tribulations are those of women, nothing before them but lives of "toil and drudgery." Uncle Tom, for example, who has a "feminine" nature and speaks in "a voice as tender as a woman's" also has "in full, the gentle, domestic heart, which woe for them! has been a peculiar characteristic of his unhappy race." The African race, we read, is "not naturally daring and enterprising, but home-loving and affectionate"; it is naturally soft, patient, sensitive, forgiving, and religious—in short, womanly. Uncle Tom, as Leslie Fiedler notes, "is really a white mother in blackface and drag." Similarly the one likeable white male among the major characters is St. Clare, who is "remarkable for an extreme and marked sensitiveness of character, more akin to the softness of woman than the ordinary hardness of his own sex." St. Clare is redeemed from his ordinary male hardness by the death of little Eva and the memory of his mother: "The most brutal man cannot live in association with a strong female influence and not be greatly controlled by it." His dying word is "mother."

Conversely, you can always tell the bad guys because they drink (they hang out in "some filthy tavern, or some low haunt of vulgar debauchery"); they are irreligious; they disparage women; they are lecherous. What really heated Mrs. Stowe's imagination was the use to which male slave owners put their pretty slave girls. Simon Legree, St. Clare's negative image, drunk, blaspheming, haunted to near madness by the memory of his saintly mother, beats Tom to death when Tom won't tell him where the escaped slaves Cassy and Emmeline are hiding. Cassy is Legree's concubine; Emmeline, if Legree has his way, is to replace her. But Legree dies for his sins—"Excess had brought on that frightful disease that seems to throw the lurid shadows of a coming retribution back into the present life." As St. Clare's mother appeared at his death bed to usher him into paradise, so Legree's mother appears at his death bed to send him to the other place: "At his dying bed, stood a stern, white, inexorable figure, saying 'Come! Come! Come!'" Margaret Mitchell, in *Gone with the Wind*, puts an ice pack on Mrs. Stowe's prurient fever. She describes Yankee women, who "accepting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as revelation . . . evidenced what Scarlett felt was a very nasty and ill-bred interest in slave concubinage."

By then the first great wave of American womanist writing had receded, pushed back by the winds of social change, by literary

realism, naturalism, and modernism. Certainly, there were wavelets during the twenties, when the Woman's Christian Temperance Union spearheaded the drive for Prohibition. As she charged into a Wichita bar, Carrie Nation wrote, "The first thing that struck me was a life-size picture of a naked woman, opposite the mirror. . . . It is very significant that pictures of naked women are in saloons. . . . The motive for doing this is to suggest vice, animating the animal in man and degrading the respect he should have for the sex to whom he owes his being, yes, his Savior also!" She threw her first two stones at the painting, her third at the mirror; then she began to smash bottles with an iron rod. And now that womanist writing is once again in full flood, Carrie Nation's descendants are spearheading a drive against pornography—and for the same reasons.

For all that, it would be unseemly for men to grouse about womanist fiction. Whatever else it is, literature, says Kenneth Burke, is equipment for living, although some equipment is better than other kinds. And if womanist fiction helps equip anybody to live, it more than justifies its existence. If men need to equip themselves, there is already more male chauvinist fiction around than anyone could read in a lifetime. Just the same, every contribution so far by American fiction writers to world literature has been an assault on the womanist complex of values. The fiction of Cooper, Poe, Melville, Twain, London, Crane, Dreiser, Stein, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald is all antiwomanist. (The exceptions are Hawthorne, Edith Wharton, and Henry James, who appropriated womanist sentiments and situations for ulterior purposes.)

So, until recently, was the fiction of Roth, Bellow, and Heller, for example. But Roth's last three novels constitute an extended apology for the treatment of women in his best two novels, *When She Was Good* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. Saul Bellow's last novel has no hero; but its flighty male protagonist (who reminded every reviewer of Saul Bellow) is chastened and domesticated by the courage and dignity of his wife and mother-in-law—as the flighty and philandering hero of Joseph Heller's next to last novel is chastened and domesticated by his virtuous wife Belle. There's a failure of nerve there, perhaps even a craven impulse to curry favor, certainly a reknitting of the apron strings these writers had once gleefully cut in the characteristic American male writer's gesture of self-definition. It's too bad, because craven fiction never equipped anybody for anything.

No one can accuse Alice Walker of a failure of nerve—which may be why *The Color Purple* has meant so much more to American readers of fiction, the majority of whom are still women, than have the recent novels of Roth, Bellow, and Heller. For the sake of those contraries without which there is no progression, I would rather have manist writers bare their fangs than hide behind a sheepish grin. They can be sure that womanist writers will no longer pucker up, whatever the manists do.

Coming in

PARTISAN REVIEW

- Selections from the *Memoires* of Raymond Aron
- Steven Marcus on George Orwell
- Maura Daly: An Interview with Michel Tournier
- John Elderfield on contemporary art and modern memory
- Mary Lefkowitz on Michel Foucault
- Jeffrey Hart: Reflections on Pornography
- Peter Berger on Western individuality
- André Malraux: A Remembrance of Meeting Leon Trotsky
- Lionel Abel on the idea of the avant-garde
- Stanislaw Baranczak on Czeslaw Milosz

Morris Dickstein

**URBAN COMEDY AND MODERNITY:
FROM CHAPLIN TO WOODY ALLEN**

Most attempts to analyze comedy turn on how it is consumed: the psychology of the audience or what makes people laugh. But it should prove equally useful to examine the cast of mind of the author or actor: what kind of people need to make other people laugh? No doubt there are as many different answers to that question as there are kinds of comedy, but here I'd like to explore the relation between comedy and insecurity or feelings of marginality. My main exhibit is the work of Charlie Chaplin, the most celebrated comedian of the twentieth century, whose tramp-hero is the marginal man *par excellence*. Closely related to the pathos and defensive humor of Chaplin's antihero is a long tradition of Jewish humor which—whether naive as in the famous Chelm stories or sophisticated, as in the work of S. J. Perelman, Nathanael West, Nichols and May, and Woody Allen—feeds on anxieties with which an audience can easily identify.

This kind of comedy becomes increasingly important as modern life becomes more urbanized and industrialized, as it dissolves traditional social ties and replaces them with more impersonal economic ones. The city, as Georg Simmel has written, "grants to the individual a kind and an amount of personal freedom which has no analogy whatsoever under other conditions." Yet at the same time it creates uncertainties of identity and status unknown in rural and small-town society. Under these conditions the Jew, with his long experience of marginality, his painful history in every society in which he has been an uneasy guest, becomes a modern Everyman. This helps explain why Jewish humor proves to have an enormous appeal beyond its natural constituency. Humor is rarely exportable, but Jewish vulnerability—and the impulse toward defensive self-mockery—seems to be something that many other people have experienced.

All through his career in a Hollywood built by Jewish moguls out of an immigrant's fantasy of the American Dream, Charlie Chaplin played cat-and-mouse with the idea of being Jewish. During the thirties and forties he was universally assumed to be at least part Jewish. (Hannah Arendt, for example, devoted several pages to

him in her 1944 essay, "The Jew as Pariah.") This was asserted as fact by his scrupulous biographer Theodore Huff in 1951, only to be denied by Chaplin himself in his autobiography thirteen years later. His most recent biographer, John McCabe, throws up his hands in despair at Chaplin's many contradictory remarks on the subject. To Huff Chaplin was "an extremely complex personality . . . enigmatic about his birth, family background, childhood, and early youth." To a degree, this remained true even after the wealth of Dickensian detail which the actor finally put on record in his memoirs at the age of seventy-five.

But there are many sources of marginality besides religion, including gender, early psychic wounds, class, and social origins. Whether or not Chaplin was a Jew, his book certainly showed that he was a creature of the seamy underside of city life. Today it is hard to separate the tramp character from Chaplin's own unforgettable account of how drink, destitution, insanity, death, and the workhouse plagued his luckless parents during his early years, as this vaudeville family clung to the tattered remnants of its former gentility. The tramp, after all, is a decayed gentleman holding on to the appearance of respectability long after the substance, if he ever had it, has vanished. In other terms, he is a character who—like the music hall comedians among whom Chaplin grew up—literally creates himself before other people, in a world that's always a stage. Such a fluidity of identity is characteristic of city life, where the ascribed roles and family roots of rural society slide over towards anonymity, and people can sometimes become whatever they appear to be.

This play of appearances, rich with social nuance, is one of the keys to Chaplin's art and to his amazing modernity and timelessness, which some critics no longer recognize behind his "old-fashioned" technique. It's no accident that writers from Melville to Ralph Ellison have settled on the con man and trickster as an archetypal modern figure; Chaplin's tramp survives through many of the same qualities of resourcefulness and self-adaptation. No one has ever accused Chaplin of being a modernist, in the sense of belonging to a vanguard committed to aesthetic experimentation. Though film is nothing if not a modern medium, Chaplin's own artistic credo is rooted in vaudeville and pantomime, the clown tradition, and even Victorian melodrama. "To me," he once said, "theatricalism means dramatic embellishment . . . the abrupt closing of a book; the lighting of a cigarette; the effects offstage, a pistol shot, a cry, a fall, a crash;

an effective entrance, an effective exit . . . they are the poetry of the theatre."

But Chaplin left himself out of his most theatrical film, *A Woman of Paris*; his tramp character is too protean to be accommodated by any wellmade play. Living by his wits, full of invention, the tramp is always making himself up as he goes along, with the fluidity and grace of his physical movement expressing his supple identity. If such self-creation is a facet of city life, it's also typical of the Jew who is trying to pass; indeed, it's a distinguishing feature of modern life itself, when people can no longer be kept "in their *place*" because their place has been eliminated or altered beyond recognition, and they are constantly bombarded by images of alternative lives, which make them dreamy and discontented. It's easy to forget that in films like *The Bank* and *The Gold Rush* Chaplin is a great poet of reverie; his lowly hero has lyrical dreams in which he triumphs as a lover or a man of action. These compensatory fantasies mark him as a man of imagination but also confirm his status as an outsider, a social reject.

This kind of ambitious dreaming is a characteristic modern theme, a theme of feverish aspiration inspired by images of other lives and higher possibilities. For Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, the streets, shops and department stores of Chicago form a gallery of possibilities undreamed of back in the small town. Don Quixote, Julien Sorel, and Emma Bovary are uprooted by the books they read, but in the twentieth century our fantasy lives are usually stocked with movie material, with a galaxy of stars and easy wish-fulfillments that are larger than life—indeed, that are a deliberate reversal of the frustrations of everyday life. Eventually, movies began to make this dream process one of their own themes. In Keaton's *Sherlock Junior* Buster plays a projectionist who falls asleep and becomes part of the movie he is showing, during which he performs extraordinary feats denied to him in the more mundane story that frames this astonishing sequence. Chaplin's tramp gets the girl more often in dream than in reality. Different as they are, Belmondo in *Breathless* and Woody Allen in *Play it Again, Sam* share a dream of becoming Humphrey Bogart. In this typical modern landscape, the comic incongruity separates fact from fantasy, social condition from dreamy aspiration.

No one has ever given a better account of the irreducible individual caught in the impersonal machinery of modern society than Chaplin in the great first reel of *Modern Times*. Yet comedy in general

is something alien to our classic discussions of modernism, which invariably emphasize its bleaker and more problematic side, as in Irving Howe's insistence that "nihilism lies at the center of all that we mean by modernist literature." Comedy is much less alien to modern art itself, from the savage humor of Dada and surrealism to the linguistic dandyism of the early Wallace Stevens to the slightly Chaplinesque Jewish hero of Joyce's *Ulysses*, to the grim existential humor of Beckett, Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd, to the playful wit of Picasso, Satie, and Cocteau, to the gay effusiveness of Pop Art and the New York poets of the fifties and sixties. Many of the modernists were enthusiastic consumers of popular culture, which they preferred to the cant of the official culture of their day. They were drawn to the unpretentious vitality of the music hall and the cinema over the commercial slickness or suffocating seriousness of the theater and the novel. The modernists loved art that looked naive and spontaneous, however much subtlety had gone into it, art which seemed at one with its audience in a way that usually eluded them. The silent comedy of Keaton and Chaplin was extravagantly admired by the surrealists and early modernists for the way it effortlessly evaded the constraints of the official realism while remaining close to ordinary life.

Like Shakespeare's plays and Dickens's novels, Chaplin's films transcend our artificial distinctions between high culture and popular culture. He was at once a consummate artist and probably the most beloved and widely known performer who ever lived. As an obsessive perfectionist he was almost unbearable to work for; he usually shot hundreds of feet of film for every foot he eventually used. Yet he also prided himself on the universality of his visual language. His films are as accessible to children as to greybeards; they meant as much in the African bush, where his face was readily recognized, as in cosmopolitan New York, where a theater in the 1920s showed his work for ten years running. He was devoted to pantomime as the essence of all acting, and he bitterly resented the coming of sound for impaling the cinema on language barriers and talking heads.

Several of the most traumatic moments of his early years, as described in his memoirs, are associated with sound and language. His mother's career as a performer—and the family's fortunes—disintegrated when her voice began to fail her on the stage. His own career began prematurely, at the age of five, when he was led out to replace her before a jeering audience in the middle of a performance. "That night was my first appearance on the stage and my mother's

last," he tells us, as if the poor woman had died while giving birth — to him. Years later he landed his first part as an actor and, still barely literate, needed his older brother to read it to him and help him memorize it. Once, out of work, he went on the stage as "Sam Cohen, the Jewish comedian," but found himself unable to master either the jokes, the physical appearance, or the requisite accent; he fell instead into an anti-Semitic caricature. His memoirs pass over this problem of identification only to underline his trauma as a performer:

That ghastly experience taught me to see myself in a truer light. I realized I was not a vaudeville comedian, I had not that intimate, come-hither faculty with an audience; and I consoled myself with being a character comedian.

Chaplin's failure to play the Jew, to achieve rapport with the audience, turns him into a virtuoso impersonator of other characters. But his failure to achieve this intimacy was also a failure with language. Later in the book — a book he was very proud of writing — the autodidact takes note of the insecurity at the root of his passion for reading: "I wanted to know, not for the love of knowledge but as a defense against the world's contempt for the ignorant."

The same social insecurity that turned Chaplin into a reader became the unacknowledged basis of his comic gift. The Jewish comedian must have been the last role he was unable to play, for he turned himself into a performer who could mimic anyone and anything. "He could probably pantomime Bryce's *The American Commonwealth*," said James Agee, ". . . and make it paralyzingly funny into the bargain." Confused about his own identity, he became everyone and no one, and achieved a complicity with audiences that had eluded him as an individual. The long-standing myths about his background and even his birthplace, the enigma of his religion — which he often fed with misinformation — all belong to the domain of what he suppressed as he reformed himself with every part, every gesture.

By 1940, with the world in flames, he was even able to play the part of the Jewish barber, though not as well as he imitated the absurd dictator, who happened to resemble the famous comic actor — they were actually born within a week of each other. With this dual role Chaplin expressed his own ambivalent identity. By telling us that torturer and victim were really the same person — that "we have all of us," as Wordsworth said, "one human heart" — Chaplin avoided

casting himself solely as the victim, a role that history had already carved out for the Jews. Once the tramp could fight back; in the early films he even had a great deal of the rogue in him. Now, even more than in *Modern Times*, he has been overtaken by history, overwhelmed by forces that rendered his defenses irrelevant. This is the last film in which the tramp appears, and it ends on an uplifting note which is actually a confession of failure: an impassioned speech—not by the tramp, the tramp is gone—but by the actor directly to his audience. Impersonation has run its course; the reign of language has begun.

What is suppressed in the mind remains covertly present, always threatening to reappear or showing itself in what does appear. This is the essence of Freud's theory of wit as a defensive process in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, where the raw material is the self-deprecating Jewish anecdotes he loved to collect. But Freud perversely ignores the social sources of these defensive strategies and confines himself to the psychic process alone. Chaplin's autobiography is full of evidence of his lucky inability to put the troubled conditions of his early years behind him. No sooner did he escape the poverty of the East End than he began to make emotional visits to his boyhood haunts, propelled in equal measure by feelings of nostalgia and revulsion. In one sense, all of his work is a series of nostalgic visits to the marginal existence he had left behind yet integrated into his art through the character of the tramp.

As a child living from hand to mouth, from odd job to odd job, by the age of twelve, says his biographer Roger Manvell, "he has passed through virtually every strong experience that was to illuminate his art." This comes to mind later when Manvell catalogues the infinite variety of roles the tramp would play in Chaplin's earliest films. He was "a comic chameleon who could become anything the situation demanded—not only a waiter, an ex-convict or petty crook, a prop man in a vaudeville theater, a janitor, a cook, a baker's, a piano-mover's or a paperhanger's assistant, but also an errant husband, a city slicker, a film actor, and a fake boxer."

Thomas Burke, a writer who shared his background and knew the dark side of London, met Chaplin during his famous return visit in 1921 at the height of his celebrity. Burke shrewdly observed that,

He is first and last an actor, possessed by this, that or the other. He lives only in a role, and without it he is lost. As he cannot find the inner Chaplin, there is nothing for him, at grievous moments, to retire into; he is compelled to merge himself, or be

merged, in an imagined and superimposed life. . . . It might explain why he is unknowable.

This may be true for most actors, who, as Diderot noted, may be most convincing when they are most detached, and who may cease to be interesting the moment they try to "be themselves." Actors, like other artists, turn their early wounds into sources of strength, their marginality into mobility, their anxiety into empathy and finally into control.

What can be said of acting can also be said of comedy. It would be too sweeping to say that all comedy is based on insecurity, but this is certainly true of Chaplin's comedy, and it connects him to the whole tradition of Jewish humor, from the defensive saintliness and ineptitude of the classic schlemiel, to the nihilistic antics of the Marx Brothers, to the neurotic intellectuality of Woody Allen. Chaplin's early life was so painful he didn't *have* to be Jewish; the memory of indignity was the fuel of his genius. Seen in this light, comedy is an obsessive return to—and mastery of—painful situations. The comedian is the goat who volunteers for public sacrifice, and thus cements the bonds of the community; he is the fool whose folly proves wise, the lowly subject who is finally crowned king. He disarms what most upsets him by exposing it publicly, by turning secret humiliations into shared laughter.

The Jewish comedian may have few other avenues to success and recognition. Striking out indiscriminately at himself and at the world, he is a prime example of what J. M. Cuddihy calls "the ordeal of civility," the trauma of social acceptance for the ambivalent outsider. Yet long before Jewish emancipation from the ghetto, as far back as Aristophanes, humor took upon itself the double mission of satirizing society and reconciling us to it. By ventilating discontent, by playing on the distance between *is* and *ought*, humor can be either subversive or quite harmless—a safety valve for the status quo. The cynicism of folk wisdom, so free of illusion, is also free of hope, shot through with a sense of fatality. In this sense humor is conservative.

Yet very little has been written about the contrary tendency: its subversive and anarchic potentialities. In the comedies of Howard Hawks, for example, rapid-fire dialogue becomes the spirited equivalent of swift, sure physical movement in the silent films of Chaplin and Keaton. Just as Chaplin plays off his own agility against lumbering "heavies," who are too slow or rigid to match his resourceful dexterity, Hawks sets off his own irrepressible id-figures against

characters who lumber orally, who do not flow. In Hawks the theme is a Freudian one—an explosion of energy and libido against the rigid ramparts of routine and constraint—but in Chaplin, who did not grow up rich, as Hawks did, the theme has a much more social dimension.

In a 1918 article called “What People Laugh At,” the key word Chaplin uses is “dignity.” People love to see the early comedies make fun of cops, he says: “Here were men representing the dignity of the law, often very pompous themselves, being made ridiculous and undignified.” There is also, he says, “the delight the average person takes in seeing wealth and luxury in trouble.” On the other hand, the tramp is the man who, “having had something funny happen to him, refuses to admit that anything out of the way has happened, and attempts to maintain his dignity. . . . All my pictures are built around the idea of getting me into trouble and so giving me the chance to be desperately serious in my attempt to appear as a normal little gentleman.” (One example is Chaplin’s famous drunken solo in *One A.M.*, a routine he had often done on the stage. Instead of doing a rip-roaring drunk, he tries hilariously to remain in control. “Intoxicated characters on the stage are almost always ‘slightly tipsy’ with an attempt at dignity, because theatrical managers have learned that this attempt at dignity is funny.”)

This “dignity,” the visual emblem of class and respectability, is not simply a way of maintaining appearances in a shifting world where appearance helps determine social position. Directed at the rich and powerful, it is an instance of what Freud calls the comedy of “unmasking”—“the method of degrading the dignity of individuals by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular the dependence of their mental functions on certain bodily needs.” Attacking their dignity is a way of deflating the authority of the law and the snobbery of the rich. But for the underdog character, the social misfit, this attempt at dignity is a psychological necessity, an instrument of survival. The tramp keeps his self-respect even when he gets respect from no one else. When his kernel of humanity goes unnoticed, *we* notice it, for we share it.

The advantage of the tramp over his larger and stronger tormentors is not simply his physical agility but his agility of mind. In *The Gold Rush* the starving man turns shoe-leather and laces into a gourmet meal, a triumph of mind over matter, while his companion, a man of more limited imagination, looks on in disbelief. But when *he* is hungry enough his mind plays tricks on him and turns the

tramp into an enormous chicken. Later, Charlie, whose imaginative flights are less predatory, conjures up a dream of love and warmth around the dance of the Oceana rolls, a fantasy that is later realized by the film's happy ending. In this picture, unusually, the tramp finally becomes rich, as Chaplin himself had, but on the boat bound for home he wins the girl only by reassuming his tramp costume and falling back into steerage. Only then does he know that he's loved for himself, not for his money.

The subversive qualities of Chaplin's films and of most comedies arise out of a deep-seated conservatism. Chaplin stays close to the bone of human experience, emphasizing our need for food, love, warmth, nurture, and self-regard, which society often fails to provide. Modernist works, with notable exceptions—Beckett's plays, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*—rarely function well on this basic and quotidian level. When modernists express their wonder at Chaplin they often slight his fundamental humanity and turn him into a surrealist, or a formal innovator like themselves. "The egregious merit of Chaplin," according to T. S. Eliot, "is that he has escaped in his own way from the realism of the cinema and invented a *rhythm*." Even James Agee, who had celebrated his own discovery of ordinary life in the tortured pages of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, echoes Eliot when he says brilliantly that "Chaplin got his laughter less from gags, or from milking them in any ordinary sense, than through his genius for what might be called *inflection*—the perfect, changeful shading of his physical and emotional attitudes toward the gag." Chaplin's own accounts of his working methods are quite different, stressing above all his need for close observation and likeness to life. (As early as 1915 he wrote: "We rehearsed over fifty times some of the small situations. . . . This was because I was striving for naturalness, and it meant intense concentration and hard work for all of us.")

I cannot here go on to discuss in detail the Marx Brothers and their occasional scenarist S. J. Perelman, and his brother-in-law, Nathanael West, and, finally, the more consciously modern comedy of Woody Allen, as the subject demands. But I believe they exploit some of the same outsider motifs that ally Chaplin's work to the tradition of Jewish and urban humor. "Jews are marginal men," wrote Isaac Rosenfeld in 1944, and the Jewish writer is a "specialist in alienation," yet this disability gives him an ideal perspective on modern society, in which displacement, exile, and change are almost the norm rather than the exception.

One of the ways the Jew triumphs over his marginality and

expresses it is through language, making an alien tongue the instrument of his needs. Yet for the immigrant, as for the pantomime artist, language is the great stumbling block. Out of the delirious word-play of Perelman, the Marx Brothers develop their own vertiginous relation to language: Groucho's puns and machine-gun insults, Chico's zany misunderstandings, Harpo's childlike translation of words into objects. Language is the weapon with which Groucho batters the impermeable fortress of Margaret Dumont's bulky respectability. Like Chaplin's, their comedy is directed against all forms of pompous inflexibility, but it is also more manically destructive, more absurd and surreal. Harpo's rubbery physicality, so gleeful and infantile, is the least common denominator of all human experience. He is the anarchic id: when he hears the word culture he reaches for his scissors. And when he destroys a book we are told, "he gets mad because he can't read." His attitude towards language is defensive, prophylactic.

For Woody Allen, whose *New Yorker* stories are an offshoot of Perelman's, the problem is to get away from language—from the excess baggage of intellectuality and one-liners that burden his early movies—and to do something more physical and more visual (two deeply rooted Jewish taboos). In his best films like *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* he resolves this not by imitating silent comedy and pop movie genres, as he had once tried to do, but by going for deeper characters and real emotions, as Chaplin did when he rejected both the songs, jokes, and comic routines of vaudeville and the custard pies and frantic chases of Mack Sennett.

Allen uses more modern and more local material; the brittle world of the Upper East Side, the regular bulletins he gets from his analysis. In case he feels too much at home with himself, he makes the disastrous *Stardust Memories*, a film that wallows in self-pity, misanthropy, and classic Jewish anti-Semitism. In *Broadway Danny Rose*, a gentler film, he pays tribute to the stand-up Jewish comics of the past, and he himself uneasily plays the agent as Jewish mother and suffering servant, endlessly nurturing freakish performers who are born losers. His best recent films, *Zelig* and *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, center ingeniously on characters who have no personality at all, who take on the coloring of the people around them, the movies they see, and the roles they play. Allen's work shows that even a Freudian, and one who has made it, can keep in touch with his insecurities, just as Chaplin kept in touch with his poverty and vulnerability even as a wealthy man. Chaplin was physically at home in the

world but socially he was destined to feel homeless. He remained an English subject, but after the fluidity of identity he achieved in America, England became impossible for him. After his first tour of the States with the Karno company, his homeland made him moody and depressed: "I loved England, but it was impossible for me to live there; because of my background I had a disquieting feeling of sinking back into a depressing commonplaceness." Not long afterward, when he began to make films in America, he made a two-reel comedy full of touches of pathos called *The Immigrant*, which, 57 years later in *My Life in Pictures*, he could still describe as the closest to him of any he had ever made.

This film, as Isabel Quigley says,

was simply highlighting the 'outcast' aspect of Charlie's nature. The tramp is an eternal outsider to ordinary society, the immigrant an outsider compared with the native, and Chaplin himself was not merely an immigrant in America—how precariously poised there, later events were to show—but an immigrant in the entire society to which, with success, he had suddenly climbed. For a climber, however much welcomed, never belongs . . .

The events of the 40's and 50's, along with his own contentious character, conspired to rekindle Chaplin's feelings of rejection. He concluded his career with several bittersweet films, one of which, *Monsieur Verdoux*, was a masterpiece. That Chaplin never really found a home, that he continued to hold family and fortune together by his wits, was painful for his life but vital for his art. By the time of *Monsieur Verdoux*, *Limelight*, and *A King in New York*, when he is losing his public and losing his country, with the tramp completely behind him, he turns rejection into a new marginality and a different kind of strength.

BOOKS

NEW YORK INTELLECTUALS

THE INTELLECTUAL FOLLIES. By Lionel Abel. W. W. Norton & Co.
\$17.95.

This past decade we have read considerable intellectual autobiography: William Barrett, Irving Howe, William Phillips, Lillian Hellman, all have told us what it was like to have been young, thinking, quarrelsome and political during the 1930s and 1940s. Mary McCarthy is currently finishing her version of those turbulent times, and the new addition, this past year, has been Lionel Abel's utterly delightful and irreverent backward glance at his own life: *The Intellectual Follies*.

French novelists, at least prior to the nouvelle vague, frequently began their autobiographical fiction with the innocent young hero's arrival in Paris. (There was no other city.) Indeed, the protagonist's loss of youthful ideals, his rite of passage into a more knowing, albeit at times cynical maturity, is connected to his encounter with Paris. It becomes the equivalent of life itself.

Whether it was Lionel Abel's abiding delight in French culture that prompted him to adopt this frame, or whether it was a happy accident, it is a particularly felicitous choice for *The Intellectual Follies*. It works. Abel's first chapter, "The Modern Moon — A Young Man Beginning" charms and sets the tone Abel uses throughout.

I would be nineteen at the end of November. I had some prospects but little money; however, I was not thinking about money. I did not even know there had been a crash on Wall Street. . . . No doubt with each breath I took in, some favorable situation was being lost. But I was wholly unaware that this was happening, looking forward as I did to the adventure before me, my scheduled meeting after dark with Lionel Stander.

In the park I thought, "This is the place for a tryst." But the fact was that I knew nobody in New York City with whom a tryst was possible. A tryst with the park itself? Why not? I write down the very words I used about fifty years back: "Tomorrow at the same time of day I shall sit here on the same bench, with the same tender feelings for this place."

There is the same sharp, passionate youthful urgency as in the famous beginning by Paul Nizan (Jean Paul Sartre's closest friend from their Sorbonne days) to *Aden Arabie*: "I was twenty. I will let no one say it was the best time of my life. Everything threatens a young man with ruin: love, ideas, the loss of his family, his entrance into the world of adults. It is hard to learn one's part in the world."

Abel was a far more mischievous bohemian wanderer than most New York intellectuals—he played around with the surrealist painters in New York in the 1940s and broke bread with Sartre's crowd in Paris after World War II—though never parochial or predictable. He was also a political animal. As the significant thing about socialism is either its new political theory, or its active practice, and most New York intellectuals did neither, frequently their heated writings on socialism tend to be askew and boring. But Abel's lively account of happenings in the thirties during the period when "the whole of New York had gone to Russia," including the blow-by-blow description of how Rahv and Phillips "stole" *Partisan Review* from the communist movement is wonderful: it appears to be one of the few times the communists claimed they had their property taken from them. Abel points out this was a considerable act of courage during a period when the labor unions, the New Deal, and the general temper of the times was pro-Russian. Abel's account of the Trotskyists' assumption that the Nazis would win the war and of their disinclination to back "capitalist democracies" is troubling. "Perhaps," he says, "they would not have been so trusting of the 'dark' concepts embodied in their philosophy of history if they had had a little more respect for natural rights and the existing laws they so often dismissed as bourgeois illusions."

This failure to appreciate the everyday bread and butter rights which bourgeois society takes for granted also permitted the American anticommunist left, so valiant in perceiving early the totalitarian nature of the Russian experience, to remain tragically indifferent to McCarthyism.

Indeed, I do feel that Abel, who displays a marvelous dialectic sleight of hand plus a talent for drama as an avant-garde playwright, goes somewhat far afield when he juxtaposes Sartre's metaphysical statement that all anti-Semites are murderers (a statement meant to shock the numbed French conscience concerning their complicity with the Nazis in rounding up Jews for deportation) with McCarthy's witch hunt. One was a verbal statement, the other a

legal action with profound consequences for America. Also, we are American, not given to Napoleonic rhetoric. We judge McCarthy by our own standards: was his behavior constitutional? Did it mesh with our value system? For me the answer always has been no.

In the early thirties, Abel points out, the crowd in the Jumble Shop referred to "Charlie Marx." How much more American than Karl Marx! That was the time when "Communism was twentieth-century Americanism." In Abel's and other accounts of the period, it is clear that for the generation of Jews who came of age during the Depression, between the two world wars, communism, because of its emphasis on internationalism, and because it put Jews in contact with other Americans and other parts of the country, including farm people and union organizers, gave the illusion that they were becoming "real Americans." To have in one pot the idea of moral goodness, becoming a real American, a real Russian, a real poet, a mover and shaker in changing the course of the world was incredibly heady; how hard it must have been for the left to give up their original ticket into America.

Mailer is the first significant Jewish writer to become a mainstream American novelist; *The Naked and The Dead* is a war novel, and war always, for all immigrant groups, has been the ultimate nationalizer. On the whole, the Depression group, because of their age, didn't have this experience, which is probably what made them cling so desperately to their socialism. I remember, during my early days as a writer, in the late 1950s, being baffled by being asked in a *Dissent* symposium which addressed itself to my generation's identity, how I had been affected by the Jewish experience of the pogroms. But, ironically, I felt my own sense of identity erased by the questions asked. My father had been a Jewish kid from deWitt Clinton High School; after a stint as Woodrow Wilson's youngest campaign manager, he ended up as a private in the trenches in Ardennes, Chateau Thierry. He was gassed, spent three years in a French hospital, then came to New York and started legal practice in the palmy, optimistic 1920s. When he died, in his eighties, he still was remembering his army buddies who got blown up in the trenches.

Thus, I always knew I was the child of a World War I hero; the trenches, not the pogroms, were my father's crucial experience: I could trace my parents' essential lives in the novels of E. E. Cummings, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and I was the child of all that. I was struck that in *The World of Our Fathers*, Howe makes no reference to World War I as a profound landmark Americanizing experience for

Jews, and I wondered at that omission. According to Abel, C. Day Lewis, the English poet laureate, paraphrased the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, "Why do I, seeing a soldier, feel ashamed?" substituting "communist" for "soldier"; Abel makes clear that socialism, for his generation, was meant to have the significance that the war had had for a prior generation: what became a minority experience, socialism in America, originally had been intended to be mainstream.

What makes the book an utter delight, is Abel's jaunty wanderings among the surrealists and existentialists. In addition to New York's voyage to Russia, the other big event of the 1930s was the ferment in the art world. By the early forties, European intellectuals and artists turned New York into a dazzling place. It's nice, finding out firsthand what they were up to. At a party for the magazine, *Instead*, at Matta's place, in the Palisades, Marcel Duchamp suggested that the men place a masked man in the children's playhouse and suggest to each woman, as she arrived at the party, that "just as there were foods to be eaten and liquors to be drunk, so there was a man in a mask in the children's house to serve any purpose a woman might have." Duchamp, then, with abundant bad faith, asked Matta, whose wife was having an affair with Pierre Matisse, what he would do if his wife went into the playhouse. "I don't want her to." "Why not?" asked Duchamp. "Because," Matta said, "I love her and she loves me." "I think you're stupid," said Duchamp. It sounds like a terrific Lionel Abel play; I had always heard about the sexy lives of the surrealists, but most accounts don't actually capture their slightly off-the-wall spirit. Abel has a Proustian sense about what we readers really want to know; what is significant about high and low life. Thank God, he is a playful ex-leftist! After Matta lost his wife to Matisse, he made off with Mougouche, Gorky's wife. Sexual freedom, then, was neither the prerogative of the bourgeoisie nor the puritan socialists. For the surrealists, it was part of their statement: Abel thinks, "The great thing about the Surrealists is that they were attuned to the distress of their time—a distress which continues into ours, and to which the American abstract artists, including Gorky, were not attuned. There is one single exception—Jackson Pollock."

Abel became one of the few New York intellectuals to engage seriously, not only with the art world, but also with Europeans like Sartre, the complex Andrea Caffi for whom the bourgeoisie were "those who can afford to take trips to America to see their mothers," and Nicola Chiaromonte. (He mentions Chiaromonte's anger at the

Spanish communists' murder of Andreas Nin, the leader of the *Poum*, and Durutti, the anarchist leader—yes, concerning Nin, but no one knows who shot Durutti in the back. Koltsov, the *Pravda* correspondent, whose account of the Civil War wasn't published until after Stalin's death, and who was purged on his return home, has a long paragraph on Durutti's death in his diaries. "Poor Durutti," he wrote, "poor Durutti.")

Abel has many tonalities in this book. His account of Sartre as "the best writer among philosophers, the best philosopher among writers," is an extraordinary synthesis of the best of Sartre's contribution to our thought and our literature. As Abel points out, it was Sartre who first made possible the post World War II idea of being a communist without believing in Marx. He says of him: "His hesitation was between Hamlet and Don Quixote, and he tried out the postures of both, the first during the Spanish civil war, [Sartre, unlike Malraux, chose not to go], and after World War II the second, when he tried to take communism away from the French Communist party in the radical grouping of rassemblement he started with David Rousset." Abel traces Sartre's development of two opposing philosophical theories: Sartre's strength was in abundance of thought, of action, and of daring not to be consistent. Like Sartre, Abel has an extraordinary combination of talents: playwright, critic, thinker, political creature, a hobnobber among artists, bohemians, low and high life, all of which makes his autobiography essential reading for those who want to know what it was like when the cream of the crop started out in the thirties, and, fortunately for us, became our intellectual survivors who were in it for the long haul.

BARBARA PROBST SOLOMON

TRICKS OF SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

GRACE ABOUNDING. By Maureen Howard. Little, Brown, and Co.
\$13.95.

NO FOND RETURN OF LOVE. By Barbara Pym. E. P. Dutton.
\$12.95

If self-consciousness is one prerequisite of worthy fiction, its opposite—the play of the unconscious—is surely another. Art

cannot exist without some degree of artlessness; no amount of calculation can produce an epiphany. But in an age when we are reminded on all sides of critics and criteria, when the nature of good writing—and good reading—is publicly defined again and again, novelists must often be tempted to listen more closely to the mandates of self-styled pundits than to the secret urges of the imagination. Novels these days are more and more often written by the book, dictated not by the Muse but by a sense of what Great Literature ought to be.

In two recent books, two highly accomplished novelists, Maureen Howard and Barbara Pym, address the tricks and treacheries of the wanton unconscious. Yet Howard's artistic method is as self-conscious as Pym's is self-effacing. And, perhaps not coincidentally, Howard, apparently a cosmopolitan writer au fait with today's approved fictional strategies, spins an absorbing tale whose virtues run ahead of its achievements; while Pym, whose mystique lies in her relative indifference to literary trends, writes an appealing novel whose whole is more distinguished than its make-up.

Howard's *Grace Abounding* reads, in a sense, as if it were designed to be put together or taken apart in some School of Creative Writing: All its themes are capitalized for easy digestion, all its symbols spelled out for trouble-free dissection. Every motif is placed just so, every irony comes thoughtfully gift-wrapped, every metaphor has been laid out as precisely and tidily as hors d'oeuvres at a fashionable cocktail party. For all its melodious fluency, its metropolitan refinement, its impeccable manners in entertaining grand American themes (the loneliness of the imagination, the encroachment of the prim upon the primitive, the barbaric yawps of the genteel tradition and the need to balance loves both sacred and secular, and so to find a religion that is a form of love and a love that is a form of sacrament), *Grace Abounding* seems, in its subtle way, to be anything but subtle.

Such schooled artfulness and calculated helpfulness are disappointing, I think, given Howard's distinct gift for evocation and ellipsis. She seems intent upon presenting the lovely sylph of her prose in the one context—a hermeneut's seminar—where its elegance and grace will be least appreciated. For there is no disputing that the novel's plangent phrases fall just right. Its incantatory, cloistral rhythms both advance the story and cast shadows on its surface. Lullaby and threnody chime in its clean cadences; church bells toll through it moody sentences. Yet it is precisely the knelling eloquence of Howard's opening—a kind of spinster's Song of

Songs — which makes redundant her portentous references to the Bible. Her beautiful conjuring of the noiseless, weightless swirl of a snowstorm in which movement and silence fall together makes gratuitous her begged-for comparison with Mrs. Dalloway. Her intermittent astuteness — in noting her heroine Maude's realization, for example, that with her mother's death she has lost a pet name and therefore a kind of identity — puts to shame all the studied subtleties of calling the heroine "I" and "Maud" and "Bert Lasser's wife" to show how everyone presents different selves to the different souls he meets.

There is no denying that Howard is a conscientiously observant writer who registers with wonderful precision the details of commuter lifestyles, intellectual trends and social postures. Many of her interiors have the bright, clean spaciousness of *New Yorker* covers. She records tone-perfect exchanges ("Out with those boys until this hour?" asks a concerned mother. "We went to Dunkin' Donuts," answers her sullen daughter), coins trenchant phrases (one couple had become "Christmas Card friends") and even catches fugitive sorrows ("What Bert Lasser never quite got was how deeply his wife feared purposeless days"). Thanks to the density of its prose and the shrewdness of its choices, *Grace Abounding* does manage to cover a large amount of ground in a small amount of space. And yet in spite — perhaps because — of her self-consciousness, Howard often does little more than trick up a melodrama in the season's latest literary fashions. Her shortcomings, moreover, seem the result not of too little thought, but too much; of plotting not wisely, but too well. She confuses the stylish with the stylized. And so, at heart, and beneath all the palpitating prose, her novel enjoys little of the tranced and transporting mustiness of a real American original like Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, nor even quite the cosmopolitan poise of Shirley Hazzard's *Transit of Venus*. *Grace Abounding* has, in the end, too little witchery and too much craft.

To say that Howard's book comes to resemble the envelope that Maude finds, "written so nicely and evenly it might be penned by a schoolmarm or a nun," makes it sound as if it were written by the relentlessly unfashionable (though currently voguish) Barbara Pym. Yet for all their similarities, the two could hardly be more different. For if Howard's characters and devices are unflaggingly sophisticated, Pym's people and prose are above all else straightforward. Both novelists favor dank, close chambers, but Howard searches for infinite riches in the little room, where Pym prefers to dwell on — and

in—its smallness. If Howard is grand (and very American) in her ambitions, Pym remains deliberately circumscribed (and very English) in hers, and where Howard's women entertain visions that are gaudy, shocking and chic, Pym's country mouse females enjoy the most modest, even moth-eaten of dreams. (It is noteworthy too that the American heroine is young at forty-three; the English-woman aging at twenty-seven.) Pym's patient, diffident women—blue of stocking, not of blood—treat life as if it were a book they were not writing, but reading. So too, Pym is determined to have almost no designs upon the reader, no great expectations, no intricate patterns except in her plot. Her charm lies in her innocence of literary fashion, her willingness to sew together a series of shrewd observations into nothing more, nor less, than a solid, old-fashioned entertainment.

From the deflationary title of *No Fond Return of Love* to its benevolent conclusion, Pym restricts herself to the narrow imaginative limits occupied by her unprepossessing heroine. Like the rest of Pym's fiction, this novel resembles nothing so much as a cramped, somewhat lonely little bed-sitter complete with floral wallpaper, well-made bed and pot of strong tea. Psychically, the weather forecast always calls for mild drizzle; the menu generally offers up macaroni cheese, tomato soup and boiled potatoes, with Nescafe for pudding; the *dramatis personae* include nobody except timid scholars, spinsterish researchers and bachelor clergymen. And all the excellent women are, of course, themselves vicars—unrewarded consolers and confession-takers who choose to live vicariously.

Pym catches the tiny tremors and shy sorrows of these women manqués with such glancing precision, balancing amusement and sympathy so evenly (and instinctively) that every incident becomes, as the heroine regards a friend, "at once comic and pathetic." Her eye infallibly alights upon all the humble objects that are, as she puts it, "mean" unless or until they are transfigured by sentiment. Above all, she expertly calibrates the gradations of embarrassment, regret and disappointment. "Life," she ventures, "is often cruel in small ways." The sentences that stick here, and the sentences that sting, are always spoken softly: "It is sad, she thought, how women longed to be needed and useful and how seldom most of them really were," or "Perhaps it is sadder to have loved somebody 'unworthy' and the end of it is the death of such a very little thing, like a child's coffin."

The transforming grace of Pym's measured compassion is that she brings to her sheltered characters the same strict wistfulness they

bring to the world, yet treats their lackluster good nature no more kindly than does the world. Many of her heroines are as polite, well-meaning and earnest as Paddington Bear; their element is innocence, and their natural environment a schoolgirl's world of crushes and mild-mannered schemes, lessons and secret treats. They are still guileless enough to regard a librarian as glamorous, compare an old professor to Rupert Brooke, listen with beating hearts to a lecture on "the terrors and triumphs of setting out a bibliography correctly." And in the end, their deepest sorrow is that they are unable to abandon this sweet naivete, yet much too sensible to allow themselves the luxury of foolishness or hope. The absence of glitter from their lives is only made the sorrier by the absence of illusions; the inalienable sadness of Pym's forgotten characters lies less in the drabness of their lives than in their steady and unsentimental acknowledgement of that drabness. Both of the quotations that conclude the previous paragraph are placed in the person of the heroine; elsewhere, she asks, almost rhetorically, "Do we all correct proofs, make bibliographies and indexes, and do all the other rather humdrum thankless tasks for people more brilliant than ourselves?" Beyond making sympathetic those characters who seem charmless from the outside, Pym manages to convey the ache of their knowledge that they will never by themselves win sympathy from outsiders.

Pym's women are, in addition, much too practical to linger on their disappointments: they recognize that these must be borne bravely, and alone. And their sadness is tenacious because it involves no bitterness and no prospect of epiphany. Their lives, the heroine thinks, have "the inevitability of Greek drama." But in reality, of course, her life proves to be all inevitability and no drama, all sorrow and no sweep. It is not a dark star that hangs over such destinies, just a very dim one. Howard's characters fly on the wings of reverie to a Brontean heath; Pym's women visit that magic place fleetingly, but are doomed to awaken almost immediately, aware that theirs was an unattainable dream and that they must attend instead to the daily round.

Though Pym's devices are certainly as careful as Howard's, they refuse to draw attention to themselves. Pym is content to allow features to remain features without becoming themes. Thus the names in her novel are by no means carelessly chosen, but nor are they transparent: the still pretty, but entirely unromantic heroine is called "Dulcie" (though she does in a moment of panic seize upon the alias of Miss Lamb).

When the brave, goodhearted, lonely heroine is seen through the eyes of her sweet eighteen year-old niece—as a bland, joyless dullard—we do not see so much as feel her hurt. And though Christianity is a constant presence in Pym's novels, their matter-of-fact moral is that the meek, however blessed, will not inherit the earth.

Pym takes trouble all the while to observe the rules of storytelling. She organizes her fiction with brisk aplomb and drives her story forward at a smart, spritely pace. Every strand of plot is assiduously tied together with an economy and a reliance on coincidence that makes her universe a small world as well as a world of small horizons. Although she indulges herself cautiously by obliquely defending her art ("People blame one for dwelling on trivialities . . . but life is made up of them," muses Dulcie, while a housekeeper assures her elsewhere, "Oh, I know it's a trivial detail, but these are the things that make up life, aren't they."), she makes few claims for it. Notably conscientious toward her reader, she tells her story and, when it is finished, stops. She does what she can do, and nothing more.

This can, on occasion, make her universe almost suffocatingly cosy (even when the protagonists repair to a seaside resort, they meet nobody there save schoolteachers and clergymen, and even when they board a train, their fellow travelers are—what else?—a clergymen and his maiden sister). It also means that one of her books is almost indistinguishable from another and that her entire oeuvre can be—as a Pym character might put it—quite pleasant, but a little tiresome.

Of the two novels *Grace Abounding* is undoubtedly the more daring, more exciting, more important; but its knowledge of its own importance and its anxiety about it tend to obscure its intrinsic power. And where *Grace Abounding* disappoints only because it delivers much less than it promises (or even pretends), *No Fond Return of Love* satisfies because it provides exactly what it claims. On reflection, the pleasures of glittering soirées may prove less durable than those of teatime chats in modest quarters where words are less loaded and lines less rehearsed.

PICO IYER

REMEMBERING MAX HAYWARD

WRITERS IN RUSSIA, 1917-1978. By Max Hayward. Edited and with an Introduction by Patricia Blake. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. \$22.95.

Max Hayward, who died in 1979, was neither an academic nor a man of the political world, though his attainments included scholarship of formidable expertise and intelligence, on all things Russian and Soviet, and on much else besides. Yet in the classroom, in spite of his not altogether unpleasant experiences there, he never felt quite at home. And as for high politics, he never was a British Foreign Service type, and the climax to his diplomatic career came in 1948 when he accompanied the British Ambassador in Moscow as interpreter to an interview with Stalin and was rendered speechless for the whole session when he noticed the dictator's polio-stricken left arm and withered hand so exactly like his own. He never for very long held any post with specific duties. He never wrote a book. He was diffident to the point of shyness; yet also boisterous, unruly and untidy. He had a long bout with alcoholism, which he bravely but wanly won. Had it not been for him, our knowledge and understanding of contemporary Russia and of Soviet culture would be rather more meager and brittle than they are.

He was born in 1924, which means he grew up in the Depression years, even tougher in Britain than they were here. He was born in London, but his people came from Yorkshire, and he sometimes liked to refer to himself as a Yorkshireman, though sometimes also as cockney, almost always as in some sense "lower class" and occasionally as a *muzhichok*. When I met him in the 1950s, I had the impression of a very intense, breathlessly shy person who looked at me as if he wanted to find out everything there was to know about me with that look, but would have been more comfortable looking through a telescope from a thousand miles away. His father is described by Patricia Blake in the warm and imaginative memoir that introduces this careful selection of Max's essays as an "itinerant mechanic," or, in terms a bit closer to our own time and place a migrant skilled-worker. Yet Max wasn't quite working-class either. In Liverpool, where he grew up, he made it to the Liverpool Institute, a grammar school that put him on a university track but made him a prominent target for the neighborhood kids, who referred to his ilk as "pigs."

"Since then I've always been a fake and a defector," he used to say. But he came late to the Institute and was never entirely at home there.

It was in Liverpool that Max Hayward discovered gypsies. He had a natural gift for languages. Later, he was known as a brilliant linguist who not only commanded many vernaculars of Russian, but most of the other Slavic languages, Hungarian, Welsh, Chinese, and modern Greek, an array in which his fluency in French and German hardly counted! But Romany was his first love, and it sprang out of his deep sense of identification with gypsy-life: impoverished, vagrant and outlaw, classless and commonplace, yet mysterious and exotic, ground-down, persecuted, dispersed, yet toughly surviving, after so many disasters and dispersions, seemingly capable of perpetual regeneration. Some of that first-feeling for gypsies was later attached to "cosmopolitan" Jews, dissident Russians and other outcasts. On holiday from his Moscow diplomatic post in 1948, traveling along the Georgian Military Highway, Max came across a band of gypsies he recognized as belonging to a rare tribe, a straggle of survivors from Stalin's attempt at genocide, and he was so moved he wept.

Never on very good terms with his own family, especially not with his father whose aspirations for him he alternately succumbed to and resisted, there was something very adoptional about Max, and though he was an awkward and alien figure among his fellow students at Oxford, he became an intimate in the households of the emigré Russian professor, George Katkov, a descendant of the great nineteenth-century Russian publicist, and of the Slaters (Lydia Slater was the sister of Boris Pasternak). His shift in study away from primary concentration on Chinese, first to German and then to Russian, was influenced as much by personal as by public considerations. Later, he spent a year studying in Prague, just before the Communists took over, and then two years with the British embassy in Moscow, at a time when few foreigners had or could have any but the most formal and restricted contact with Russian life. Under such circumstances Max had an extraordinary talent not only for getting on, but even for getting in.

Leonid Leonov, for instance, a talented but quite "official" novelist, became his friend. Later, Max was to write that Leonov regarded conforming to the standards of socialist realism as "a kind of *podvig* in the Russian Orthodox tradition." Leonov, generally compliant to the wishes of the regime and under strong pressure to disavow the description, curiously refused. Max had not only

established a gypsy-bond with the exbohemian, Stalin Prize winner, but had touched on a performance of pride.

In 1948, too, he went to a poetry recital at which Boris Pasternak was supposed to appear. It was the coldest weather of the cold war. The reading took place in what was then the largest auditorium in Moscow, in the Polytechnic Museum. It was billed as "An Evening of Poetry on the Theme: 'Down with the Warmongers!' For a Lasting Peace and People's Democracy." Pasternak had recently been attacked in the press. There was some fear that Pasternak had agreed to attend such a clearly propagandistic occasion to make amends and show himself "a true Soviet poet." The hall was crowded, and there was an unusual sense of excitement in the audience. In Max's account:

About twenty poets trooped out onto the stage and sat down dutifully on chairs facing the audience. In front of them was a table, and a rostrum with a microphone. But Pasternak was not among them. One chair at the back of the stage remained empty. The tense expectancy in the hall gave way to what was quite evidently a mixture of disappointment and relief—after all, what would *he* have been doing in this company? It seemed probable that he had been excluded at the last moment, or had simply decided against it himself.

As the standard propaganda-evening of declamatory reading proceeded, however, Pasternak slipped quietly in and sat down in the chair in the back row. One could hear a certain strain enter into the recitations. Then Pasternak's turn came. With a kind of invincible puckish innocence he apologized for having no poems on the theme of the evening, but offered to read some poems published years before. After each poem, there was tremendous applause. People began to shout out requests for particular poems:

At one moment he forgot a line and was immediately prompted from various parts of the hall. . . . Somebody shouted, "*Shestdesiat' shestoi davai!*" (Give us the sixty-sixth!)—this was a request for Pasternak's version of Shakespeare's sonnet. . . .

Tactfully, Pasternak refrained from reciting the lines which in English read:

And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscall'd simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill. . . .

There was no need to recite the lines; the audience knew them by heart.

It was thus as early as 1948 — the year Orwell wrote *1984* — that Max Hayward became aware of a world still much alive under the stifling “totalitarian” world of Party domination, a world in which the interests of “the common people” (with whom, as Leszek Kolakowski pointed out, Max always identified) and the suppressed but still smoldering freedom of literature and culture were closely linked. Pasternak was king of the gypsies, symbolically enthroned, but wielding real power. When, years later, through the intervention of his mentor Katkov and with the collaboration of Manya Harari, Max translated *Doctor Zhivago*, it was no mere job of work, but a long-standing commitment to a deeply felt cause.

Max was not literary. He referred to himself as “a vulgar factologist” and had little patience with what he called “literary twaddle.” Complex interpretation of literary texts, the relationship between story and plot, form and content, the fine points of structure and style — in his writing, Max seemed always to be tiptoeing nervously away from such considerations. But he knew authentic voice when he heard it. He could hear language stirring against all the structures designed to muddle and befuddle and bend to other purposes its efforts to speak the bedrock human. That was his great, if fragile, gift.

When most Sovietologists were saying, after Stalin's death, that nothing in the Soviet Union had really changed, because there had been no major institutional changes, Max was among the few to insist that in the institution of literature at least there had been a real change, if not of official policy, at least in tone and atmosphere and the degree of rigor of exercised control. And voices were being heard in public, saying things that could not have been said a few years earlier. Perhaps Max went a bit overboard on the importance of Ev-tushenko and even Voznesensky. Nevertheless, he was not wrong in pointing out their importance, nor was he mistaken in insisting later, after they had fallen from fashion in this country, that in spite of some pretentious hollowness especially in the “platform” poems of

the former, they were nevertheless poets of genuine lyric talent, if not of the order of talent many were overeager to attribute to them at first.

For Max, that perhaps “vulgar” but by no means commonplace “factologist,” life was at its greenest and had its deepest charge where a vernacular language showed its roots in a folk culture. And literature was interesting to the degree that it spoke for the aspirations of the folk, preferably in some fragment of the vernacular, or at least (as with Pasternak) in a way that recognized its dignity and its link with freedom. That was why he could commit himself passionately to writers whom more specifically *literary* critics might see as antithetical: Leonov *and* Pasternak; Voznesensky *and* Nadezhda Mandelstam; Solzhenitsyn *and* Siniavski. His commitment to the last-named pair is particularly striking, since the entire recent Russian emigration, or at least that part of it with literary leanings, is split over these two names; the followers of Solzhenitsyn excoriate Siniavski; the followers of Siniavski look at least critically and more often with disdain at Solzhenitsyn. Max’s politics were deeper and broader and less partisan than that. He did indeed have some sense of identification with Russian nationalism, with those aspirations of nationalism that were accompanied by a sense of obligation and responsibility to the folk and folk-culture and to freedom for the common people. Clearly, both Solzhenitsyn and Siniavski shared these aspirations, whatever their feelings towards each other.

Here is a passage from Max’s introduction to the translation he did (with Kyril Fitzlyon) of Siniavski’s *A Voice from the Chorus*. The book consists of letters Siniavski wrote his wife during his seven years’ confinement in Gulag, and in these letters Siniavski sets his thoughts on life, death, literature, the world, over and against the overheard speech of his fellow inmates. It is a typical passage in Max’s writing in that it reflects his deepest and most intense interests; it is also a passage of brilliant insight into the book in question, and it is both eloquent and simple:

The meaning of what the chorus says is, however, of less concern than its tone or flavor; in vocabulary and phonetic coloring, it vividly echoes the submerged vernacular of the Russian lower depths into which the author was cast; it is a speech abounding in malapropisms, non sequiturs, grotesquely garbled forms, pathetically inadequate attempts at “educated” parlance, slang words from the criminal underworld, camp jargon, etc. To a

Russian ear (and, alas, in all the nuances *only* to a Russian ear) this verbal flotsam and jetsam evokes—not with condescension, always with compassion and wonderment—a whole world in which language mirrors a desolation of the spirit such as is everywhere closer, perhaps, to the essence of society at large than may be readily avowed.

The emphasis is on the strangeness and the expressive worth of the language, and its home in “the lower depths.” Politics is not at all remote from this kind of interest, though partisan politics *is*. In a partisan sense it takes a certain political naivete to be for both Solzhenitsyn and Siniavski, and in a partisan sense Max often showed a certain naivete, as for instance when, late in his life, charmed with his retreat on Spetsai and in love with the Greek language, he thought of taking Greek citizenship at a time when the colonels were in power. But when it came to cultural politics, the relationship of culture to the political powers that be, Max had sure instincts and a profound understanding. He knew very well that after Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union could never be the same again.

What, ultimately, were his achievements? It must be admitted that in spite of occasionally striking passages like the one I have quoted above, Max comes to more vivid life in the remarkable pages of Patricia Blake’s memoir than in the collection of his own writings that follow, carefully chosen though they are. They consist mostly, after all, of introductions, and it was Max’s purpose not to express himself but to explain and introduce the book in question. While there are important insights in many of these essays, one cannot say that they form an impressive oeuvre.

Max was certainly among the best known and most competent translators from the Russian. Alone or with a collaborator he translated the best known works of Siniavski (“Abram Tertz”), Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*, and the memoirs of Ivinskaia, Solzhenitsyn’s first (and best) novel, Alexander Ginzburg’s notes on the Siniavski-Daniel trial, and the two volumes of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs, to name only the most prominent of the prose works that came into English largely through him.

His reputation as a translator suffered a severe blow when Edmund Wilson attacked his translation of *Doctor Zhivago*. He and his collaborator, Manya Harrari, had worked under great pressure of time, and with an immensely difficult prose text by a poet whose stylistic self-consciousness was legendary. As Patricia Blake points

out, Max was profoundly hurt by Wilson's criticism, which turned out to be without foundation. While there were, to be sure, some stylistic infelicities, the famous "six errors" that Wilson listed^d turned out to be half Wilson's own (his Russian was never as good as he seemed to think it was) and half the responsibility of the American publisher.

It was a mark of Max's diffidence, his respect for Wilson, and his utter incapacity to hold a grudge, that they later became good friends, and it was Max who coached and helped him in his famous duel with Vladimir Nabokov over the vagaries of the latter's translation of *Eugene Onegin*.

It was diffidence, charm and a selfless immersion in the work, too, that made Max such a superb collaborator. The anthologies compiled and edited with Patricia Blake, outstandingly *Dissonant Voices in Soviet Literature* and their bilingual selection of poems and plays from Mayakovsky, still stand as models of their kind. Again with the intermediacy of Patricia Blake, his collaboration with poets like Auden and Stanley Kunitz to bring outstanding modern and contemporary Russian poets into English was remarkably successful. Yet his personality and the centrality of his role in the enterprise remains very much in the background.

For every book that Max translated from the Russian, as Patricia Blake points out, he was responsible for at least twelve more finding their way into English. With his assistance, Manya Harrari and Susan Villiers founded the Harvill Press in England, which published a considerable number of important books translated from Russian that other publishers would not handle, including Gladkov's *Meetings with Pasternak*. He organized and encouraged a number of important symposia on Russian literature and the Soviet Union. His influence at St. Antony's—which enjoyed a certain extraterritoriality from his general discomfort at Oxford—was considerable. In the end, unlike Matthew Arnold's "Scholar-Gypsy," he returned to Oxford, and held court in his hospital room, before he finally died of cancer, somewhat in the manner of those people at Oxford he had once referred to as "the Lords," yet at the same time reminding his visitors that he still considered himself a *muzhichok*.

I think there are few of us in Anglo-American scholarship of Russian and Soviet literature and the politics of Soviet culture who have been untouched by his knowledge or uninfluenced by his views.

SIDNEY MONAS

KINDS OF RECALL

ABOUT ROTHKO. By **Dore Ashton.** Oxford University Press. \$19.95.

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST PAINTING IN AMERICA. By **William Seltz.** Harvard University Press. \$60.00.

HERBERT FERBER. By **Eugene C. Goossen.** Abbeville Press. \$85.00.

For those who lived it, abstract expressionism is close enough to touch. And for those who still live it, whose values and whose friendships were built around its artistic vision, abstract expressionism has not been superseded by recent developments in art, no matter how rigorously conceived or vociferously championed. In different ways, each of these three authors recalls abstract expressionism and endeavors to appraise it despite strong personal bias; each proposes to bring the discernment of time to bear on the fervor of the moment; finally, each represents a kind of commemoration, one in writing a deferential critical biography, one in reissuing a sacred text, and the last in rendering an homage that tacitly serves to bond the group.

Dore Ashton has set herself the noblest of biographer's tasks: without neglecting her archival responsibilities of recording the salient events of Mark Rothko's life (though not its tormented legal aftermath), she has undertaken, as she says, quoting him, to penetrate "the meaning of a man's life work." The book describes the slow, abiding product of Rothko's life work. The uniform, quietest structure into which his paintings finally settle shows the artist's great insight into the latent power of structural passivity to free the eye for the deep and subtle immersion color has to offer. Under the right viewing conditions, Rothko's sophisticated hues seem like apparitions of felt knowledge, green on top of plum, plum through black, and ultimately, in Rothko's words, "black over all." To apprehend color under oceanic circumstances is to grow quiet in order to approach a revelation of unfolding, the unfolding of the human condition. Ashton's patient unfolding of Rothko's spiritual development entailed prolonged grappling with content; indeed, content rather than form is the subject of Ashton's book. She describes how, pulling away from his colleagues' anecdotal treatment of social issues, Rothko, at age forty-six, without abandoning human concern, finally arrived at a definition of painting deeply gratifying to

him both as a man and as an artist. By 1949, she implies, the long haul was reified in color. For those who believe meaning inheres in paint, it is not too farfetched to say that by this time Rothko has earned the right to claim that his veils of color express the meaning of his experience. In this way, Ashton presents a compelling case for his canvases being thought-paintings, symbolist vessels whose meaning we might voluntarily recreate in contemplation.

Ashton so deliberately insists on Rothko's content that in reading her biography it is difficult to see his paintings merely as products of taste and sensibility. But this common misapprehension greeting Rothko also afflicts other painters, who, like him, are as profound as they are decorative. Bonnard, too, who died in 1947 as Rothko reached his artistic maturity, was said to be facile and agreeable. Ashton would seem to be readdressing similar misreadings of Rothko by focusing our minds on Rothko's artistic intentions, doing honor to the art by doing honor to the man. Only by tactful indirection does she imply Rothko's refusal to acknowledge the social — and, one must say, human — context of which his paintings became a part. Though Ashton is explicit about Rothko's failings in her book *New York School: A Cultural Reckoning*, here she only implies the abnormality of Rothko's desire to control critical responses to his work and the normality of the world's ignoring, misperceiving, and overrating his art all at once. Her book does suggest some disapproval of Rothko, but only through her cumulative emphasis on Rothko's wanting to "control the situation." First introduced as the need for formal control, it assumes the weight of an obsessive, Jamesian motif, as this attitude affects the quality of Rothko's paintings. To Ashton's credit, she introduces into her largely tender portrait of Rothko the skeptical criticism of Robert Goldwater and Brian O'Doherty, as well as her own disappointment at the outcome of Rothko's control of the installation of the Houston chapel.

Ashton is silent on appraising the art. She does not discriminate among works or phases within Rothko's oeuvre. *About Rothko* thus presents an appreciation, albeit an elevated one, of the meaning of Rothko's life work. But it is a censored meaning and without the judgment that would make this lenient tribute a true critical biography.

In her book on Rothko, Ashton pays tribute to William Seitz, saying of him, "His deep intelligence sifted responses and shaped a picture of the movement that has never been surpassed." As art historian, curator, teacher and painter, Seitz brought to the task of

writing his book an excellent mix of intellectual and sensible checks and balances that enabled him to live through the tumultuous and intrinsically anarchic formative years of abstract expressionism.

It is surprising that until its current publication, Seitz's *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* circulated as a Ph.D. thesis written in 1955 while he was at Princeton. The book is actually a form of oral history, relying heavily on interviews and other primary evidence to capture the style of abstract expressionism through this chorus of living voices that, though seemingly united, is made up of individual, even divergent ideas. Featured are de Kooning, Gorky, Hoffmann, Motherwell, Rothko, and Tobey. That Pollock is the only major figure of the first wave not intensively questioned underscores the fact that the movement was very much under way as Seitz was gathering evidence of its presence. The advantage of this approach, however, was that Seitz had to examine this testimony rigorously if he was to prove to skeptical academicians that abstract expressionism was making art history, not just newsworthy storms. Seitz was obliged to supply the cultural context for this emerging style and, moreover, a critique of the movement more candid than many histories since.

Abstract expressionism produced few sculptors, so those like Herbert Ferber who, if cautious, did attempt to wrest malleable, live form from intractable matter, are acknowledged members of the movement. The direct carving that in the 1930s inaugurated his sculptural career continued to shape Ferber's approach to the gestural metal sculpture for which he has since become known. "The metaphor was not to be that of a body and its parts, but the interdependence of solids and emptiness," says Goossen, in his homage to Ferber. When in the late 1940s, working through the implications of Moore and Picasso, Ferber realized this, he came into his own as a sculptor, using his sense of craft to realize his ideas. Abstract lead-and-brass gestures over which ride spiky and lacy elements show a tentative approach to geometry, although in the 1950s, in such works as *Calligraph with Sloping Roof*, gestures become taut under the implied pressure of planes bearing down on them. Sculpture environmental in scale soon led Ferber to sculpture environmental by dint of sheer size. Goossen faithfully chronicles this development, discussing the well-known space cages and large brazed brass gestures meant to be seen, in Ferber's words, "against the wall of the sky," before passing on to Ferber's hall-sized gestures that surround a viewer, so that, reversing roles, the viewer becomes an ob-

ject, the sculpture the subject, in their encounter. If Ferber has exerted artistic influence, it has been to define sculpture and site as protagonists in man's environment, and outsized minimalist works produced in the sixties owe a debt to Ferber's ambitions for the reach of solids and emptiness.

MARJORIE WELISH

THE PROSAIC PRINCIPLE

THE MAN IN THE BLACK COAT TURNS. By Robert Bly. The Dial Press. \$10.95.

TAR. By C. K. Williams. Random House. \$10.00.

THE KINGFISHER. By Amy Clampitt. Alfred A. Knopf. \$6.95.

THE SACRIFICE. By Frank Bidart. Random House. \$10.00

Marianne Moore recommended that we read poetry "with a perfect contempt for it." Sensible advice, especially these days when, from the swelling ranks of MFA poetry programs, every Tom, Dick, and Harry—not to mention Jane, Judy, and Janice—seems to have a volume in the offing. To these competitors for our attention, we would be wise to offer strenuous resistance, at least initially, and as much in self-defense as in the earnest desire to distinguish the genuine from the spurious article. Perhaps no period before ours has set such great store by originality and authenticity as values; and how, except by an act of nerve, are we to evaluate the putatively original, the assertedly authentic? In the absence of any kind of objective criterion—it being generally conceded that command of the old techniques of verse reveals a reactionary temperament—what else can the reader rely on but his impatience with vanity, his truculence in the face of so many assertions put forth on the basis of so little evidence?

In one important respect, the contemporary critic's task has been simplified by contemporary poetic trends. T. S. Eliot stated the case in "Reflections on Vers Libre": "When the comforting echo of rhyme is removed, success or failure in the choice of words, in the sentence structure, in the order, is at once more apparent. Rhyme removed, the poet is at once held up to the standards of prose. Rhyme removed, much ethereal music leaps up from the word,

music which has hitherto chirped unnoticed in the expanse of prose. Any rhyme forbidden, many Shagpats were unwigged."

A number of our poets do indeed insist that we hold them up to the standards of prose. Some among them are so emphatically committed to a prosaic principle that they seem intent on rewriting the verse of the past as prose—without, however, justifying the right margin. "Meredith is a prose Browning, and so is Browning," wrote Oscar Wilde, but the same remark applied to, say, Robert Bly would have its wit overwhelmed by its Wahrheit. In Bly's most recent book, *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*, there appears a poem entitled "The Prodigal Son." The third of its four four-line stanzas—quatrains isn't quite the right word—reads this way:

An old man once, being dragged across the floor
by his shouting son, cried:
"Don't drag me any farther than that crack on the floor—
I only dragged my father that far!"

Nowhere does Bly acknowledge it, but the source of these lines can be only the opening of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*:

Once an angry man dragged his father along the ground
through his own orchard. "Stop!" cried the groaning old man at
last, "Stop! I did not drag my father beyond this tree."

There's no question of any impropriety here. Ever since "The Waste Land," we have grown accustomed to echoes and quotations and other such raids on the articulate—with or without the footnotes Eliot provided, with or without the quotation marks favored by Marianne Moore. But Bly doesn't really quote the Stein material, he translates it—into a specific, deliberately nonliterary idiom.

Now, unless we are prepared to redefine what we consider the hallmarks of good prose, Bly's stanza must suffer in comparison with its source. We have, after all, been conditioned to deprecate the passive construction Bly uses; it is the active voice that makes for vigor, as anyone brought up on Strunk and White must know. But certain descendants of the emancipators of verse seek precisely to alter the ground rules of prose, treating "prosaic" as synonymous with "pedestrian." In his introduction to *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* as recently translated by Stephen Mitchell, the poet Robert Hass offers a remarkable illustration of this tendency. Hass

contends that one of Rilke's early poems is less "interesting" than Robert Bly's "vigorous, unrhymed, unmetered translation" of the same work. But perhaps the reader has no German and can't hear the difference. Very well, then, Hass will demonstrate on an English model. He quotes the opening lines of Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

"Imagine if you can a translation of this stanza into twentieth-century free-verse," Hass writes. Imagine it Hass certainly can:

I'm going to get up now, and go west to Innisfree,
and I'll build a small cabin there out of reeds and clay.
I'll make nine rows of beans and a hive for honeybees
and I'll live by myself in that bee-loud valley.

Why is this version better than the original? Simple, says Hass. "What goes are the wistfulness and the music. They are replaced by a sense of active will and specificity, which aren't really in the original poem." The reader will, I submit, be hard put to find a greater "sense of active will and specificity" in the revised version. But that's not the point. "The wistfulness and the music" are indeed casualties of the procedure. "What goes" with them, alas, is the poetry itself. Imagine if you can the same method applied to *Paradise Lost*.

To be fair, not all practitioners of the prosaic principle operate with so arrogant a notion of the purviews of contemporary parlance. C. K. Williams, in *Tar*, wisely puts his versified prose at the service of experiences for which it is a suitable measure. Here's the opening of "My Mother's Lips":

Until I asked her to please stop doing it and was astonished to
find that she not only could
but from the moment I asked her in fact would stop doing it, my
mother, all through my childhood,
when I was saying something to her, something important, would
move her lips as I was speaking
so that she seemed to be saying under her breath the very words
I was saying as I was saying them.

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If there is something both charming and genuine about these lines, and I think there is, it follows from the impassioned urgency effected by the rhythmic repetitions — so that we feel a pleasurable rush when we get to “the very words I was saying as I was saying them.” This is, again to quote Miss Moore (quoting somebody else this time), “prose with a sort of heightened consciousness.”

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, we find not only a place for the genuine but a relentless sameness of tone that can prove deadening when the aim is straight narrative. Where James Schuyler, in the long, prosey lines of his justly praised “Morning of the Poem,” freely espouses, digresses, and leaps from incident to reflection, Williams gives the impression of plodding solemnly ahead in a straight line. We suspect that the means are too elaborate for the ends — and that the moment of revelation is needlessly postponed — in such a poem as “Combat.”

One of the most interesting aspects of Amy Clampitt’s enterprise is her attempt to integrate into her verse some highly specialized prose vocabularies. In her book *The Kingfisher*, there are references to music (“basso/profundo fioritura”), geology (“it was as though we watched the hairline fracture/ of the quotidian widen to a geomorphic fissure”), painting (“stemrib grisaille edge-tasseled/ with opening goblets”) as well as to evolutionary theory, botany, zoology, anthropology, architecture, and chemistry. The erudition is breathtaking, and the ambition one that we can applaud with open hearts — it’s a welcome change from the familiar anti-intellectual bias that characterizes the self-styled “deep imagists.” At her best, Clampitt fulfills a metaphysical promise. Studying a cove, a plant, a bird, she brings to bear diverse ways of seeing and lifts observation itself into a mode of meditation.

Still, for all her gifts, Clampitt tends to pile up the references, combining words with hyphens in an effort to arrive at a texture suggestive of Gerard Manley Hopkins. Consider this, from “Lindenbloom” — whose thirty-two lines form a single sentence:

a million
hanging, intricately
tactile, blond bell-pulls
of bloom, the in-mid-air
resort of honeybees’
hirsute cotillion



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We might wish she had stopped after “bloom.” And when, elsewhere, we come across “a totem-/ garden of lascivious pheromones” we find it hard to assimilate “the dripstone burin of the eons” a mere two lines later. When the researcher in Clampitt takes over, the result too often is cold intellect that fails to move or disturb us.

Frank Bidart’s mastery of his prose materials immediately sets apart *The Sacrifice*. It is particularly evident in “The War of Vaslav Nijinsky,” the stunning long poem that opens the book. By “prose materials” here I don’t mean only the prose passages about Nijinsky’s life that alternate with the verse sections of the poem. (These biographical excerpts are effective precisely because they stand unadorned, are printed as prose, and present themselves without editorial comment.) But what’s radically innovative in this poem—and in Bidart’s style in general—is his novel use of punctuation: ellipses, italics, dashes, capital letters, semicolons—in various combinations—perform the work of prosodic devices. What would otherwise be prose becomes poetry of a high order:

—Even now, I can see the World
wheeling on its axis . . . I
shout at it: —

CEASE. CHANGE, —

OR CEASE.

The World says right back: —

*I must chop down the Tree of Life
to make coffins . . .*

Tomorrow, I will go to Zurich —
to live in an asylum.

MY SOUL IS SICK, —

NOT MY MIND.

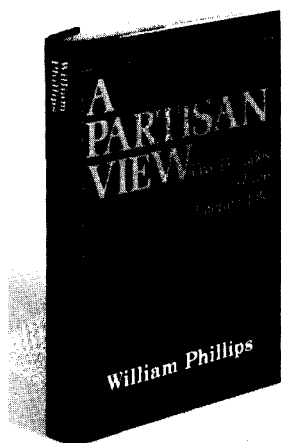
Bidart’s book is full of torment and turbulence; his is an extremist’s sensibility, with all that it entails. But “if you demand on the one hand,/ the raw material of poetry in/ all its rawness and/ that which is on the other hand/ genuine,” well then, as Miss Moore says, you’ll definitely be “interested” in *The Sacrifice*.

DAVID LEHMAN

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Such is the telling; there is also a told: the story of the "old man," rollicking and lusty, with somber recollections however of a distant childhood of Nazi persecution and deportation. The adventures include his romance with June Fanon (a transparent Jane Fonda) after a university demonstration against the Vietnam war in Buffalo (where Federman teaches) and their trip to the Riviera, the casinos; his multiple "sexual debauchery" in Monte Carlo, Wagner in Koblenz, barroom brawl in Paris; a visit to Dachau with Movie Director and his Grace Kelley starlet (yes, he makes it with her too); and, inevitably, the drunken bout, seven months in the bohemian Paris flat, to produce a work of genius, the *Voice in the Closet* (also by Federman) . . . all told as a long digression while the "old man" waits in a cell at the end to be deported (again) to the space colonies in 1999.

The surge of speech is carried in a double register: one tone is chatty, garrulous, confidential, slangy; the other is intellectual, "difficult," high-crit, academic; both belong at once to the narrator and the narrated subject, the "old man." The racy tone produces the vitalistic energy, the fictive action of the story; the intellectual tone gives it its theoretical frame and philosophical underpinnings. Mutually subversive, the "theoretical" voice undercuts the fictions by exposing their compositional tactics, analyzing the process of narrative; the slangy voice deflates the obiter dicta of the former. ("It's amazing," says June Fonda/Fanon, "how you can go on and on with these naive profundities.") So far so good, you say, these are the

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techniques of the “postmodern” novel. Federman’s *unwriting* however takes it a step beyond.

Everything is sucked away in its panverbalism, its sheer loquaciousness. The intellectual text is a *rhetoric* of the “intellectual,” intellectual “discourse” (of course) immediately recognizable by its tortured syntax, its multisyllables, its philosophical metaphors, in a word a spoof of English lit. high crit; for example, “the old man’s ambivalence toward this erasure that charges his life emotionally and informs its risks” or “what Jews show us with their undying presence is the relation of difference which the human face brings into revelation,” self-subverting logology whether applauded, “Oh that’s well said,” or put down, “We don’t usually speak that eloquently, that pompously,” by characters and narrator. Similarly the vitalistic mode is built of clichés, clichés of the American left in the Fonda episode, clichés of the lusty Henry Millerian artist in the sexy episodes, of the suffering artist in the dedicated-artist episodes, an ironically nonpersuasive, rug-pulled-out-from-under-the-feet-of-fiction, narrative. Thought and action are evacuated in the irresistible logorrhea. The endless circularity of talk is set in motion by the bizarre trinitarian nature of the narrator: fractured into two ostensible narrators (Namredef and Moinous) and one discreet “second-hand” narrator, Federman the “writer,” all linguistic splinters of Federman himself. The narrative circles incestuously between the three, mostly in the form of anecdotes told in turn by the “old man” (four), tangential to but always deflected from the “real” Raymond Federman (putative narrator number five: author looking over shoulder of narrator looking over shoulder of narrator, etc.), author (certainly) of the novels by the “old man” subjected to the high criticism and praise. Author, narrator and narrated subject fuse in the fleeting word; transparency is complete, theorem as plot, plot as theorem.

With the rediscovery of reflexivity in fiction in the sixties, progress was possible in two directions: one, toward a greater opacity of invention, keeping the devices and sense of authorial reflection and intervention but concealing them artfully in the woof of the fiction (Abish, Katz); the other, toward total transparency, exposing the fictive world as one of arbitrary stabilities flimsily subject to the whim of author/narrator. Federman has chosen the latter as his strategy of the novel. His fiction is to the novel what mime is to the theatre—no disguise, no props or barely any, a little powder and

paint, and if the mime is good he will give a suggestive show, a transparent enactment, while the audience remains amused by the deliberate artifice, the formalism of the mime. Federman mimes a fiction; he does not create one. And as he exposes technique and tactic, he makes an artistic wager—like the many casino and betting episodes in his novel—that his improvisations, his self-reflections, will pay off for a moment. A wager against high odds.

Transparency and void are finally his own: that of Federman-author, narrator and character—the mechanism of the novel is much like a vacuum-pump: the void of intellectual discourse, of narrative clichés, of the vicious circle of narration, is produced by the mechanics of talk, as he says somewhere with a very Beckettish comment, “just to go on talking.” This vacuum vacuums even itself, since finally the air is emptied out, and with no air left to exist, worse, to speak with, the novel ends, empty.

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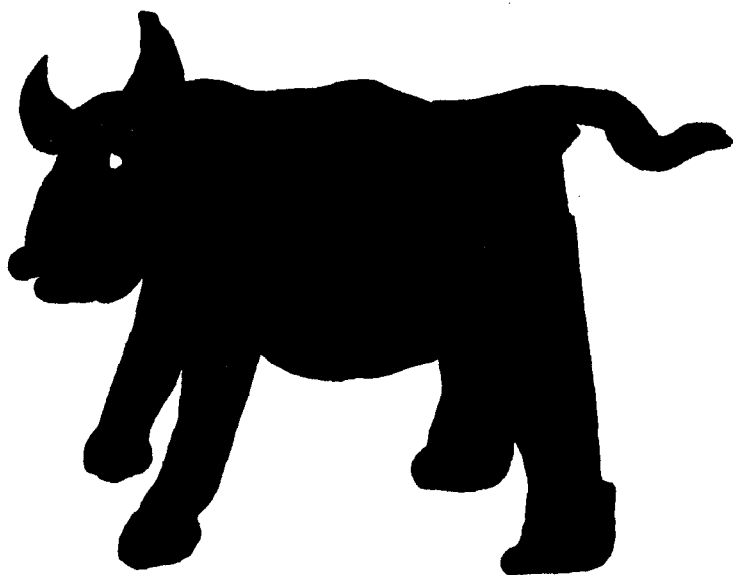
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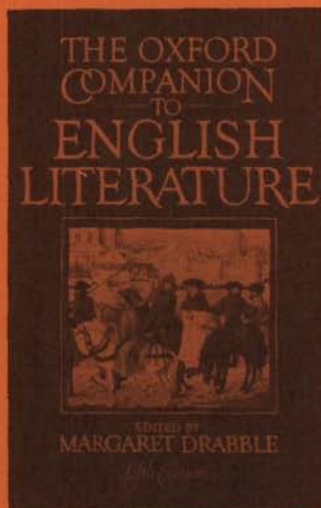


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